

# In conversation with David and Felicity

By Gail de Klerk

**David Schlapobersky, Felicity Potter and the Bukkenburg Pottery.**

**Johannesburg to Swellendam 8 years on**

*David and Felicity have been making beautiful high-fired pots for more than 30 years. In 1996 they decided to move from their lovely home and successful studio in Johannesburg and relocate to Swellendam in the Southern Cape.*

*Recently I have been communicating with them via email and asked them some questions about the move, recent experiences, their work, aspirations and some technical details.*

*Their responses, reflections and experiences follow:*

**Q** What were your reasons for relocating to Swellendam?

Our life together over the past 32 years has embraced the notion that life and work are indivisible. In connecting that to the concept that art is life and the way you live it, then change and development is not only necessary but also inevitable.

Imagination, timing and resources became some of the critical components towards making a decision about moving and taking action.

We had been looking for many years at the possibility of moving to the country and had spent a great deal of time looking at various locations.

Once we had seen Swellendam and the property that we now live on, we knew where we wanted to be. It is an area of immense beauty and an evident sense of history: a working agricultural town in rural Southern Cape that seemed to us to offer potential for life and growth.

The property comprises a Cape Victorian town house and outbuildings (1860's), proclaimed as a National Monument during the 1980's, as well as a cottage, all set on 6 000 sq meters of very fertile ground adjacent to the Drostyd Museum in the Historic Heart of the town.

It was in this setting that we saw the potential for developing our life and work as we then pictured it. Extended and enhanced working space, a showroom, a cottage for accommodating people who came to do workshops here (and also casual visitors) and extensive grounds for growing a selection of fresh produce.

All of this in a breathtaking environment halfway between Cape Town and the Garden Route on the N2 National road, (220km either way)

It was at that time (early nineties) an area that had not yet been 'discovered' as a refuge for exiles from the cities and



*David & Felicity with giant urn, at Bukkenburg, Swellendam.*

nor had it yet become a 'tourist' town. Property was relatively affordable and it felt and seemed as if the town was on the brink of growth and development.

As outsiders these were some of the main factors that seduced us.

We made an offer on the property that was accepted, took out a bond and rented it out for more than a year.

We were able to plan our move when we received a most favourable offer on our house and studio in Johannesburg.

**Q** Setting up a new home and studio in a different environment no doubt presented many challenges. What were these and what was required to overcome them, and perhaps also something dealing with your activities over the past eight years?

It was only when we were here and beginning to get going that we started to encounter some of the challenges of the move.

It's worth noting at this point that in August 1995, a full year before we moved, we embarked on a very bold step by taking an extensive and prominent stand at Decorax in Midrand. This was to give us a sense of a broader market than we had been used to and also to give us an idea as to whether we could in fact live in the country and sell our work at a trade exhibition such as this in the city.

The result of Decorex '95 was quite astounding for us. Not only did we sell an enormous amount of work during the exhibition, but also the customers and commissions that we attracted sustained our work schedule for the whole of the next year. So much so that we were still busy with work from that show when we moved, and it was that work with which we began work in Swellendam.

In short the question became, could we live and work in Swellendam and continue to sell our work in Johannesburg by travelling up once or twice a year? The experience of 1995 and 1996 gave us the confidence that this was indeed possible.

Together with this question were our plans of developing on the ideas of an "open working studio" in the country.

We had plans to turn the old barn into a studio and showroom and carrying out extensive renovations and an extension to the old house, only to be met with the very frustrating realisation that any work planned for such a building required the approval not only from the Local Authority but also from the National Monuments Council (now called South African Heritage Resources Agency).

Approval on our planned work on the studio was relatively quick, as was the building work that by May 1997 we were firing pots again and beginning to attend to some of the backlog of work for Johannesburg. We were not yet working at our full capacity as there was much else to adjust to here and it was taking us time.

We had bought a second-hand 40 cu ft LPG (gas) fired kiln with which to get going and that would also give us time to consider which way to go with regard to something bigger. (We were firing a 90cu ft gas kiln when in Johannesburg firing on town gas, and we were keen to get back to that size of kiln again).

On investigation, LPG seemed to be a very expensive fuel and so we set about converting the kiln to fire with paraffin.

At the end of '97 we held our first 'open day' in Swellendam. (The first of three over the coming three years).

Also at the end of 1997 we met Gawie and Gwen Fagan for the first time. We had approached Gawie due to his eminence in the field of conservation architecture and we were becoming very frustrated at our inability to move ahead with regard to the work we needed to do to the house. His grasp of what we were intending, his ability to turn it into an achievable and affordable project, and his understanding of the requirements of the National Monuments Council suddenly shot the process forward. Our plans were approved, we had a commitment and budget from the same builder who worked on the studio, and we were under way!

The building work on the house was completed in mid-1998 and at the end of the year we held another event, this time it was an 'open weekend'.

It was during this weekend, December 1998, that in conversation with other artists and crafts people from Swellendam and the surrounding areas, many of whom brought their work to sell in our environment, we began to develop ideas that could have some impact on local development in the area.

During April 1999 we took a stand on the first Decorex Cape held at Spier Estate and again, as with Decorex Johannesburg, we did very well.

August '99 an exhibition of our pots in Westcliff Johannesburg followed by our third open weekend in Swellendam at the end of November. The discussions concerning plans for a local development programme were turning into something achievable and by early 2000 the process was beginning to move.

April 2000 a shared stand at Decorex Cape at Spier and by midyear we had become involved and very active in Swellendam's local development.

During this involvement we allowed our primary focus to become marginalised by concerns beyond our immediate environment and work and it was to continue for more than four years.

Our experiences through this process have given us a keen insight into the workings of this small rural town and the gruelling road that lies ahead as the country grapples with the very urgent priorities of recovery, transformation and economic development.

During November 2001 an exhibition at the Dorp Street Gallery in Stellenbosch and another show in Johannesburg.

2003 and 2004: building and fine-tuning the new kiln.

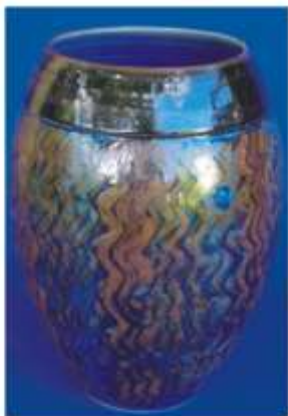
2004: April, our Website [www.pottery.co.za](http://www.pottery.co.za) was published.

November an exhibition of more than 300 pots, in celebration of 30-plus years working together. This exhibition proved to be our most successful exhibition of pots ever, surpassing our wildest expectations!

## Q How has the change of environment influenced your work?

Amongst the most prominent factors to have influenced our life and work over these past eight years:

- The change from gas to oil as our fuel demonstrating the dramatic effects of fire in this process. Effects that have taken us beyond our own limitations and where the results begin to exceed our wildest dreams.
- The privilege of being able to develop in an environment such as this, a greater appreciation of reduction fired pots not only as far as we are concerned, but to a much wider audience.
- The completely breathtaking landscape and environment in which we live and work.
- The studio and showroom are open to the public daily requiring a regular stock of fresh work and a great deal of attention to our presentation and availability. (a more business-like and professional approach)
- Constant revision and assessment of our creative impulse, goals and objectives. Remaining mindful of the road travelled, those who have been and remain part of the process, the journey ahead and the necessity for constant growth and development in all areas of our joint pursuit.
- An appreciation of the enormous resources at our disposal in this work and environment and room to grow.
- The opportunity of developing on our notions of what a professional 'working studio' could be.



*Vase, 360mm, reduction-fired porcelain.*



*Cylinder vases, tallest – 340mm, reduction-fired porcelain.*



*Giant planter, 800mm, reduction-fired stoneware.*



*Big kiln ready for glaze firing.*



*Ginger jar, 380mm, reduction-fired stoneware.*



*Bowl, 250mm diam, reduction-fired stoneware.*



*Platter, 580mm, reduction-fired stoneware.*



Giant planters, tallest 800mm, reduction-fired stoneware.



Salad – watermelon, feta & mint, quince in bowl.



Porcelain bowls, 150 & 180mm.

## David and Felicity continued

We have always been interested in exploring the relationship between the food that we prepare and enjoy, the pots that we serve the food in and the company with whom we share it all. The environment in which we find ourselves and our present circumstances have allowed us to take this aspect of our life and work into a broader and very rewarding dimension.

Pots for people, food and pleasure.

The garden and changing seasons provide us with a continuous supply of fresh vegetables, fruit and herbs. When served and presented in our handmade pots, the colour, texture, flavour, form and function become some of the subtle ingredients in the changing tapestry of life.

All of this is integral in our communication with the world around us and food, together with the pots that we make, has become central to our interaction with others.

Casseroles, serving platters and dishes, bowls of all shapes and sizes, sushi dishes, mugs and jugs etc. Most of the tableware being decorative as well as functional.

The crating and shipping of our work nationally and abroad has become a very exciting aspect. Recent shipments have gone off to Spain, Abu Dhabi and the UK.

Much of the above has begun to gel into a rhythm of life and work where the pots emerging from the kilns have a quality that we have not experienced before – colour, texture, decoration, scale, form and volume.

The range of work that we are busy with at present remains extensive and diverse:

Tableware, washbasins, lamp bases and a wide variety of functional and decorative stoneware and porcelain. Enormous floor jars, urns platters, fountains and garden and indoor containers. Special commissions for interior and landscape designers, collectors and corporate buyers.

Where an 'open studio' means just that people come and go, whether to buy pots, see the work in progress, select their vegetables from the garden, spend a night or more in the cottage or any combination of reasons. Friends, family and colleagues, customers new and old as well as a wide range of travelling people from across the country and abroad.

We are constantly being approached for workshops, instruction and training, and the interaction with those who come here for a period of work is proving to be very rewarding.

As we begin the New Year, and after having been making pots full time since 1973, we have never been more productive.

The concept mentioned earlier: 'art is life and how you live it', is playing itself out in a uniquely enriching way, and the words of William Morris from more than 120 years ago have never been more relevant for us:

"Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful or consider to be beautiful"

This concept was so effectively conveyed to us all those years ago by Tim Morris who played such a prominent

mentoring role in our early development and helped us to understand in a very meaningful way, what the life and work of studio pottery could be.

## Q You have built a new kiln, could you provide some technical information?

The new kiln that we've built is a re-build out of an existing frame. During 1998 we acquired a disused 100 cu ft electric rolling hood kiln. It was an old kiln made by Kiln Contracts in Cape Town.

The original comprised two bases and a hood that rolled over each one alternately, meaning that while one load was firing, the next could be stacked etc. We immediately saw the potential for a complete conversion into an oil-fired rolling hood kiln with just one base.

Our interest was primarily in the rolling system and the frame.

The idea that we worked on, perhaps a little extreme at the time, and which is now in operation went like this:

To construct a kiln with a fixed base at a convenient height onto which our huge pots could be loaded relatively easily from their trolleys, with a fibre-lined hood rolling over the stack up to and against a fixed wall which would include the flue and chimney.

The firing system would comprise two oil burners firing lengthwise into the kiln, through very substantial burner blocks, one on each side of the chimney.

We discussed these ideas with a friend of ours here who is a retired farmer and technically very skilled. He offered his advice and then introduced us to a young steel worker who he suggested could work on the project.

The hood is lined with high temperature ceramic fibre modules and at this early stage in its life; we are so encouraged by the way that it's working.

For a glaze firing to cone 12, we are using about 140 litres of paraffin this in a kiln of about 100 cu ft!

A glaze firing can take up to about 10 hours.

## Q What clays, glazes and pigments are you using at present?

Our focus has always been high-temperature; reduction fired stoneware and porcelain, and the clay bodies and glaze components that we use reflect this.

The stoneware clay is based on Western Province Ball Clay, blended with small amounts of Feldspar and Silica, a little red clay for colour and a large percentage of grog for strength and "tooth". The grog is a critical factor in view of the enormous size of a lot of our work.

The porcelain body is based on Kaolin G1 with additions of Feldspar, Silica and Bentonite.

Although we keep experimenting with other clay bodies, and often introduce them into our work cycle, the above two clays have been constant for many years.

The glazes that we use are mostly high in Feldspar and are also the result of years of trial and error.

The decorating oxides are primarily Red Iron, Cobalt Oxide and Carbonate, Copper Oxide and Carbonate and Rutile,

used as a wash, a pigment or slip as well as pouring and layering. We are also using our existing glazes with increasingly interesting results – poured, layered and brushed.

**Q You recently published your Website. What impact has it had on you and your work?**

Our Website was published in April 2004 and in the first nine months it received over 14 000 visits, averaging out at about 50 visits per day – with more than 58 000 images being downloaded from the site!

Having written and published the site ourselves, we are able to maintain, update and market it as well as monitor its progress.

Our Internet presence is proving to be an effective complementary tool in the marketing of our work.

It is an extensive site with text and pictures covering all aspects of our life, work and environment.

**Q Earlier on you mentioned your workshops. Can you tell us something about how they function?**

Our preferred method of running workshops at present is to respond to the requirements of groups or individuals who approach us, and they are planned in a way that fits into our work schedule (commissions, exhibitions etc).

The studio is large and well equipped and we can accommodate up to eight people at a time.

We intend to begin a more structured workshop programme in the future (time permitting).

**Q What are your immediate plans and what is your outlook for 2005 and beyond?**

2005 is certainly beginning to feel like another very busy year and we will be kept fully occupied in a variety of ways.

- The completion of orders and commissions from our Johannesburg Exhibition last November.
- Keeping adequate stock in the showroom and maintaining an attractive and inviting environment. (Swellendam's tourist industry is largely seasonal giving us time during the winter to build up stock)
- Additions to the Website this year should include a page or two devoted to the recent work of our studio assistant Flip Jacobs, as well as some pages showing Felicity's recent paintings.
- Two exhibitions are planned for the second half of the year. Details will be available after July on our Website, through the association, media and also to those on our e-mail mailing list. (Anyone interested in receiving our electronic updates and info can e-mail us).

**Q A final quote:**

I quote from the late Michael Casson. "The work I make now is based upon historical precedent. It is functional even if only occasionally used as such. Like Michael Cardew I believe that the understanding of the materials and processes the potter uses are not separate from the expression made with them. How and why are equally important and they move together as one".



*Felicity decorating planters*

These pioneers of the Studio Pottery movement of the 20th Century have so much to teach us still!

After more than thirty years of making and firing high temperature pots, our sense is that there is still a great deal to learn and do.

Our life and work as practising studio potters has been varied, rich and rewarding. We've had the distinct privilege of being able to work at home while at the same time being able to care for James, and find ourselves through our work to be connected to such an essential and timeless tradition.

Also of great value to us over the years has been the creation and sustaining of long-standing relationships both professional and personal. Many people who came initially to look at or buy pots becoming close friends of lasting quality.

We still work very hard and often think of perhaps slowing down a bit but not just yet!

We remain mindful of those whose efforts during the early 1970's brought about the beginnings of some organisation in the studio pottery environment. Much has changed since those early days.

The sophisticated global context into which we are all moving and the African environment in which we live and work tell us that the door to the future is wide open and that studio pottery, and ceramics in its broadest sense and diversity, as a way of life and livelihood has much to offer, the challenge being to remain productive in the face of the requirements of aesthetic relevance and economic viability.

*Congratulations David and Felicity on reaching this milestone in your working lives and we wish you many more years of productive and creative enterprise.*

**Gail de Klerk**  
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*Anyone wishing to visit the studio in Swellendam would be most welcome, otherwise visit their Website. Contact details as follows:*

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