

# Bukkenburg Pottery

Gail de Klerk visits David Schlapobersky and Felicity Potter in Swellendam

I recently had the pleasure of visiting Bukkenburg Pottery, the home and studio of David Schlapobersky and Felicity Potter in Swellendam in the Western Cape.

Entering the studio/gallery at Bukkenburg is a feast and delight to any potter or ceramic artist, aspiring or professional. Here we find monumental works in stoneware and jewel-like porcelain, all executed with consummate skill and flair.

Large planters, urns and floor jars, generous jugs and lidded jars, bowls, platters, vases and delicate porcelain pieces all excite ones visual and tactile senses.

Masterfully thrown by David and sensitively decorated by Felicity with fluid confident brush strokes, robust and elegant forms and rich glowing reduction glazes; iron and cobalt, celadons, khaki and their dazzling copper reds; all are a joy.

Surveying all of this one realizes that here are two artists, who over the 36 years of making beautiful ceramics, have acquired a knowledge and understanding of each other as well as the materials and firing processes they use, that is unsurpassed by most other potters. They are amongst the very few in this country who could be regarded as leaders in the field of high temperature, reduction-fired stoneware and porcelain.

It is twelve years since they relocated to Swellendam from Johannesburg and over lunch with them in their beautiful and tranquil environment I asked what inspires them, their work schedule and how they continue to sustain themselves in these times of economic difficulties. Being on their mailing list along with many others I receive their invitations and notices by e-mail and was aware that I had just missed their recent Open Studio Weekend.

*Can you tell us something about what you have been busy with since we last spoke some years ago?*

It has been a very busy few years for us and much has happened, some of which we would love to share with you. We would also like to add something more of our environment and our lifestyle which is the context for what we make and do. It is the course of our life and our work, which remain indivisible.

Mindful of the caution by Voltaire: "The secret to being tiresome is to tell everything," suffice to say we are busy with a diverse range of activities in the studio, house and garden.

In addition to our exhibitions in Johannesburg and elsewhere, we hold regular open weekends which have become something of a feature in our local productive landscape. Our first such event in Swellendam was at the end of 1997. We now have three open weekends each year for which we turn out a wide selection of new pots. For the duration of each event, we also serve lunch and

refreshments and the catering has now become an important aspect of what we provide. Felicity's cooking has become so popular and her reputation for superb cuisine so established that it has become necessary for people to book in advance for lunch.

These weekends also include studio demonstrations and we often host local guest artists and exhibitors in our cottage, which becomes a small gallery for the occasion.

Orders and commissions make up a significant portion of our work and we have been relatively busy recently.

The showroom needs to be kept stocked with good work and, as we are open to the public; the studio and environment must be attractive and well-maintained. This is necessary particularly during the summer which is usually a busy

time with numbers of travellers passing through Swellendam.

We were approached to work on a big assignment by our friend and colleague Paul de Jongh late last year. Many who read this will know that he and his wife Nina have their home and studio in McGregor, not too far from Swellendam. The project required that we throw a range of tea canisters for Nigiro Tea Merchants in Cape Town, each one weighing 4.5 kg. It was great fun and a good experience to have another potter in the studio for a while. There is much to be said for this sort of collaboration and it is a subject that ought to have its own story written up for publication.

*Your work is functional and decorative; what are your views on making functional pots, and would you also tell us something about the range of work that you are producing now?*

Yes, our work is mainly functional and decorative and has been so all our working lives. It goes back to our introduction to studio pottery and our time spent at Cresset House Training Centre and in the company of Tim Morris in the early 1970s. We understood very early on just how expensive it was to set up just a small studio, even in those days, that the making of work which we felt would sell relatively easily was a priority. Making attractive pots for use at a reasonable price seemed like the correct approach at the time, particularly as we were beginning to train young people.

From our earliest pottery experiences making functional pottery was a priority not only as far as sales were concerned but also in relation to gaining experience and ability. We were very eager to become involved in more adventurous and expressive work, even aspiring to large pots and, after several attempts, acknowledged that it was necessary to acquire some very basic skill and discipline. The most effective and meaningful way of gaining the



experience and control was to begin again with time spent on the wheel; taking the arduous route of learning all about repetition throwing, form, function, balance and design. At the time we were house parents at Cresset House and the pottery studio was close to our house. We were some distance from the city so trips to town were rare. This was before television came to this country, so once the children were in bed we could go back into the studio.

The journey to gain the necessary experience required countless lumps of clay – over a lengthy period – being wedged up, weighed out and thrown on the wheel to a marker attached to the frame of the wheel; Then came the mugs, bowls, plates, jugs, vases and casseroles etc. More and more mugs and bowls, with many being discarded along the way and the clay being recycled and used over and over again.

Although we both spent a great deal of time throwing, it became clear very early on that while David was developing fast on the wheel, Felicity's art training had more or less equipped her to take the work the next step. As fast as pots were thrown, they were now also being decorated by Felicity.

It was during those early years that our studio approach began to take on some of the form and meaning that is still in operation today. Jointly conceiving and planning the work, mixing our own clay and glazes, David throwing, Felicity decorating and all the other tasks and processes such as glazing, packing kilns etc, became part of an integrated course of action.

The discipline and structure of repetition throwing was a very important part of our early development. Making pots that could be used and sold at a reasonable price, introduced us, during the early 1970s, to a market and audience who were interested in buying hand-made studio pottery. We still derive a lot of satisfaction from making good functional pots which are well-priced, relevant and in demand. The smaller functional and decorative work often sees us through when commissions or sales of the bigger and more ambitious work are slow. Small pieces also provide a wonderful selection of kiln-filters, often providing significant extra value to a kiln load.

Smaller pieces are also very convenient for the travelling public to carry in their luggage.

We have long held the view that, if we have a wide enough selection of work, we would be able to appeal to a larger audience and through that enhance our chances of sustaining ourselves. Of course, there is also the great benefit of constantly being able to tune our skills and sense of design by working in series or ranges of pots.

We still produce a wide and varied range of work appealing to a broad and diverse audience which continues to grow along with us.

The scope of our work comprises an extensive and changing array of pots ranging from functional dinnerware in stoneware and porcelain, decorative and functional porcelain to large platters, planters and urns. Not all of it is

on show in our studio all the time, but we do attempt to keep up a vibrant and changing display. There are still many people who have a keen interest in well-made strong functional studio pottery which has been produced by hand, and our experience is that there is ongoing interest and a place for this type of work, more especially if people can have access to the studio and are able to experience even some of the making process.

Underpinning much of this has been the idea that, with the correct approach, consistency and application, we and our work would in time gain some recognition and that, as a result, our more significant pieces would attract good prices. This is just what we are experiencing now.

*The work that I've seen today in your studio and showroom is striking; what can you tell us about changes and developments in your clay, glazes, decorating oxides and firing methods that are giving you such exquisite and exciting results?*

We are both very pleased with our recent work. There are no 'new' tricks, techniques or materials that we're using, but we are achieving

some excellent results from years and years of consistent testing, experimenting and application. We have had a run of very rewarding firings lately and have also had the good fortune of working with stable raw materials for quite some time.

Also, there is a relatively high demand for our work which keeps our process moving and, as we all know, the more we work at things the better they are likely to get, particularly if there are people out there who are encouraging and keen to buy what we make.

Producing high temperature, reduction-fired stoneware and porcelain to a consistently high standard is an exacting and often gruelling pursuit. The best way to describe the factors which have contributed to what you have seen here today is to say that, under the right conditions, the process itself begins to produce its own rewards.

The rewards at present are significant, and not necessarily financial, but we'll talk about that a bit later.

*Can you tell us about these large jars that you are working on?*

This is the early stage of a very exciting assignment and the biggest of our current projects. It is a commission from a renowned wine estate and cellar to make a series of large jars for them to conduct experiments on maturing some of their 2009 white wine. We will be glad to work on an article on the whole experimental part of the process as it progresses.

The jars should be fired during late February or March and, if all goes well, be ready in time for their harvest.

*We know that you have had years of experience in different aspects of community work throughout your working life both in Johannesburg and Swellendam, having begun your working life as potters while still house parents at Cresset House, the training centre and school*



*for children in need of special care; are you active in any way in community or public life at present?*

We are not involved in anything beyond our own studio and environment at present and haven't been since about the middle of 2003. The benefits of focussed attention to our own work are clear to us and necessary to produce the type of work that is emerging from the kilns. We are however concerned at not being able to afford the time or energy in a voluntary or giving way for ongoing local community work.

*Are you still running workshops or teaching at all?*

Yes, we are teaching and are also available for workshops. We teach a regular class in Swellendam once a week to local people, and organise workshops for other people on request.

*In previous interviews and articles you have often referred to those who you regard as role models in the studio pottery world and you pay tribute to them on your Website as well.*

As we understand the term, a role model is a substantial person who is a good example to other people, and yes, we do owe our role models a great debt of gratitude. Throughout history these are the people who have often broken new ground and around whom whole disciplines have developed, and in our own part of the world, as we struggle with defining a new and meaningful identity, we're going to need viable role models more and more.

In our industry they have helped to foster an appreciation for fine pots; they have guided people like us towards a better understanding of the history and background of pottery and ceramics, the materials and processes that we use. They have also contributed to our aesthetic sense, our understanding and appreciation of the concepts and ideals on which our discipline was based; matters such as design, form, function and balance.

As we are somewhat removed from the mainstream of city life, we're unsure of just how this is playing out in the present climate, but our sense is that things have changed dramatically in recent years. The conventions of the industry have changed, and we imagine that even the stature, nature and place of the champions or role models have changed.

We were pleased to be among those who were asked to write something in tribute to Tim Morris for the retrospective exhibition in his memory organised by Ceramics SA last year at the time of the National Exhibition in Johannesburg. It was in that tribute and also on our Website that we pay our respects to those who have travelled this road before us.

*What are your thoughts on the role and function of associations or guilds such as Ceramics SA, and your observations about the status of studio pottery and ceramics at the moment?*

A diversity of work is being produced. We have recently been asking around to get a sense of what the views are

of a number of role players and academics and we have learned so much.

There is such a diversity of work and approaches, and it appears now more than ever that there are realities which are as different as there are people. Many of those who are active, are feeling isolated and maintain the need to defend their own private reality and position against some or other perceived threat.

It feels as though the self has now been set up as the measure of all things and we're reminded of the wonderful quote by Groucho Marx:

"Those are my principles and, if you don't like them, I have others."

The global village and the Internet have fundamentally changed the way we relate to each other, not just in the creative and decorative arts, but more generally too; – and this is just the beginning!

Associations in general are valuable and Ceramics SA in particular continues to play a role for its membership. We are struck by how Ceramics SA has managed to hold together in these fast-changing times, due largely to the voluntary work of a handful of dedicated people. It's no easy task if we think of what is required to organise an exhibition or series of workshops let alone accommodating a countrywide association. Our admiration goes to all who have been active and continue to keep it going!

Having said that, we can only repeat the view that change is all around us and, as the Association has changed its name from The Association of Potters of Southern Africa to Ceramics SA in recent years, much else is likely to change as well.

The conventions which informed the activities and values of many of the early participants are barely evident in this increasingly relative world, and there is a lot of new, often interesting and sometimes disagreeable work to be seen. No doubt the structure, composition and direction of the Association will continue to change and adapt as new influences, trends, approaches and personalities become involved.

It is interesting to note that there appear to be fewer and fewer young people embarking on a full-time studio approach. Perhaps this is because it has become so difficult to make a living as a studio potter or perhaps it's because, to many people, studio pottery has become rather passé. Maybe it's a combination of these and other factors. We are really not sure.

There are many new and emerging names and we can only hope that there is a growing interest and/or business opportunities enough for them to sustain their own viability and growth and the industry.

A view which has taken root suggests that we have too many producers; i.e. potters, ceramists, ceramic artists etc, or whatever name we choose, for the size of our local market, and that, in order to remain viable and progress, it will become necessary for more and more of us to export our work. Our own experience tells us that a profile abroad and foreign sales are a worthy pursuit and can be hugely rewarding; – but then so are our 'local' customers and, personally speaking, we regard it as necessary to work on both fronts.



*Above, part of the showroom.*

*Left, David throwing.*



It is sad to hear of the threat to both the Ceramic Design Course at the University of Johannesburg and the Harrow Degree Course in Britain. Perhaps it's not altogether surprising as we hear that other institutions in different parts of the world are going through similar problems.

**Q.** What are your priorities when thinking of selling or marketing your work?

We understand very well that those of us working in the creative or decorative arts are mostly selling luxuries.

We have to remain aware that we produce unique and excellent work in a very special way and we are not in competition with either industry or cheap imported products.

We need to become increasingly inventive in order to remain viable and productive with really excellent work to show and sell.

Our own approach has been to promote ourselves as much as we promote our work. To embrace the history and traditions within which we work, and try to make a tangible connection between us and our audience - using this most primitive and universal expression of human activity.

Very often it is the relationship between us and the potential customer that is so important. It is an intimate interaction and that is largely why we also attach such importance to the idea of an 'Open Working Studio' environment. This is where people are welcome to browse and watch whatever part of the process is underway. People who take the time to stop for a while and perhaps take a longer look at the work and process and ask questions are very likely to develop a new awareness and even become customers at some point in the future, if not in our own studio then somewhere else perhaps.



We continue to attract visitors, established and new customers, to the studio from all over the country and abroad. We are well situated on a significant and historic property in the historic heart of Swellendam, which is itself an historic and prominent town on the N2 National Road, halfway between Cape Town and the Garden Route.

Much of our smaller porcelain work is made with these people in mind and, amongst the travelling public, we also attract more serious buyers and collectors of fine studio ceramics. We continue to ship our work all over the country and abroad.

It is an indescribable thrill to be working on commissions and selling work to the second and even third generations of families (grandchildren) of people who first came to see us way back in the 'early' days; commissions such as special and personalised dinnerware for a son or daughter, a giant floor jar as an anniversary or wedding present or an acknowledgement of some other special occasion, and so on.

It is equally exciting to be approached for new corporate work by those who have had our work in their offices, company boardrooms and homes for many years.

We have been supplying architects and interior and landscape designers with our pots for many years and still maintain business relationships with many of them.

There is an encouraging network of support and recommendation.

Exhibitions have also been a very important aspect of our promotion strategy over the years, less now as we live so far from the city and it's become such an effort to mount them. We do however hold shows of our work around the country from time to time.

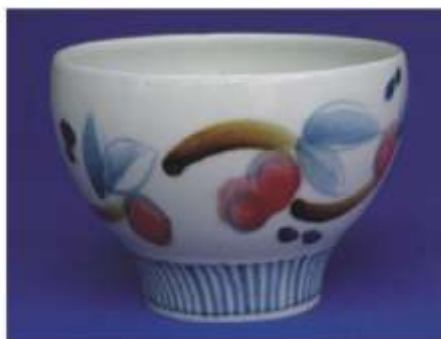
As mentioned earlier, our Open Studio Weekends have grown into a very important part of our working cycle and have become a major feature in our annual programme.

And, of course, our website continues to help sustain our prominence on the Internet and generates great interest in what we're doing, not only with regard to our pots, but in relation to the whole package that comprises our life and work in the Western Cape countryside.

None of these aspects would be enough on its own considering where we live and work. It is the mix of approaches combined with a growing reputation for excellent work that helps to keep us on the go.

*What have been some of the significant changes or developments in your motivation and inspirational sources recently, and do you still enjoy making pots after all these years?*

Our recent trip overseas must rank as the most significant inspirational event in recent times. Last year, we were fortunate enough to travel to London and through parts of Europe, the Mediterranean and Israel. We have returned inspired, rewarded, refreshed and also reassured by our travels and by what we saw and experienced.



*Left top, stoneware pots and jars – tallest 120 cm.  
Middle, porcelain bowl, 15 cm diameter.  
Bottom, stoneware pots 40 cm tallest.*

From exhibitions of contemporary work to the vast variety of ancient pots we saw in the British Museum in London, the collection in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. We experienced walking on 2000 year old pot shards on the beach in Caesarea in Israel and witnessed the ancient cities of Jaffa and Jerusalem and their amazing collections and displays.

Much of what we saw and experienced will in some way or another find its way into influencing our work, some of it has already begun to show.

Yes, we still enjoy making our pots and, more especially, in this spectacular environment. Although it is not quite as easy or certain to make ends meet as it was.

Here's a touching anecdote from an experience in the studio only about three weeks ago during the holiday period, which ties in to so much of what we are saying and feeling. It's the kind of response that tells us we're on a rather particular journey:

A number of people were in the studio and had gathered to watch David who was at the wheel working on a huge jar.

As the piece progressed, the 6 or 8 people watching all fell silent. When David had settled the pot and come off the clay, a young woman who had been watching intently could not contain herself any longer. She sighed and exclaimed, "But it's like watching a prayer!"

This type of response is so reassuring and helps to remind us that we are involved in a unique and perhaps even 'sacred' pursuit. We're convinced that she will be back.

We are constantly energized by each other and the process that has consumed our lives for so long and we are excited at what we are getting out of the kilns.

What you have seen in the studio and has excited you today is what we are privileged to live and work with all the time.

The unique smell of mature clay in the studio during a lengthy throwing cycle, the meditative time with clay on the wheel, experiencing the numerous pieces as they move through our process, from wheel to kiln to glaze, then decoration and back to the kiln. Then the smell of the kiln as the firing progresses and as we approach the reduction phase of the cycle. The excitement of opening a warm kiln and handling the new work after a successful reduction firing is an experience beyond words.

There is also an ongoing pursuit to test and experiment with new and different clays and glazes.

We work on quite a large scale, turning out pots in groups or series, sometimes one-off pieces as well, and out of this complex and all consuming process often some very beautiful pieces emerge.

In addition, we are encouraged and often inspired by those who choose to have and use our work; not to use simply in the literal sense, but to use in ways that adds value to their environments and sometimes even their lives.

*Have either of you had the need to embark on your 'own personal work'?*

Each of us has our own area of speciality which comes together in the work. It is probably quite a good example of the meaning of the word 'synergy'; where the combined effort is greater than the parts.

*Looking ahead at this time; it's the beginning of a New Year and there's a deepening international economic crisis. How are you feeling and what are you working on?*

We are facing uncertain times it seems and no-one is immune.

We are both somewhat less optimistic than we were when we last spoke. It is understandable in view of our experiences and what we are all living through.

Personally speaking, we have some interesting and challenging work which keeps us busy and stimulated; we are also planning another open weekend for April and so it goes.

Winter in this part of the country is usually very quiet and for us it's a good time to stock up in preparation for the coming summer. None of us knows what we will be facing at the end of our coming winter!

We will have to continue to explore and develop interesting and appealing ways of encouraging people to stop in at the studio and the town as they pass Swellendam on the N2. Perhaps it's time to put together another major exhibition in Johannesburg or elsewhere?

More generally we can only hope that the economic downturn won't be too grim or last too long and that the coming elections and beyond won't demand too high a price on stability and growth.

We still regard it as a great privilege to be connected to this timeless tradition and be able to make the work we do; and as we said in an update attached to the invitation to our December 2008 Open Studio Weekend:

"Our life together has always involved the care of Felicity's son James. He has grown into an endearing and attractive person and his dependence on us has dictated a way of life which we have been able to combine with the work of a studio pottery at home. Here in Swellendam we have a developing garden of flowers and vegetables in which we grow much of our own produce and we have enough land for a small flock of sheep. The vegetable garden provides a wonderful selection of produce and we regularly supply local people and restaurants with our own 'naturally-grown' salads and vegetables. The rhythm of James' needs, of the making and firing of our pots, of feeding the sheep and tending to the garden, are part of a life cycle whose integrity is reflected in our work, and we have created an environment where family, friends, colleagues and customers old and new are welcome."

This is the continuation of an early impulse that took hold of us more than 36 years ago, and it still makes sense for us today, perhaps more now than in the past. The inspiration was one of an integrated lifestyle where the 'why' has always been as important as the 'how'. So much has been possible; we remain productive with our priorities intact.

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