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Homecoming: Ceramic artist Andile Dyalvane comes full circle

For his latest exhibition, 'iThongo', a collection of stools and benches inspired by the 'ancestral dreamscape', renowned ceramic artist Andile Dyalvane goes back home to present the work to his family and community, ahead of its Cape Town and New York openings.

By Malibongwe Tyilo
December 9, 2020



Andile Dyalvane and family carry the sculpture title 'uMalusi' (Shepherd), to the site of the old village that was forcibly removed, where it was installed to overlook Dyalvane's ancestors graves. Photo by Adriaan Louw for Southern Guild

“I think for me, this work is a way home; it’s a homecoming. We are needed here, we really are; along with the knowledge and the influence we have. The city has enough happening. If the city wants something from us, they can come find us here,” says ceramic artist Andile Dyalvane.

We’re seated on the grass, under a tree at his family’s homestead in Ngobozana, the semi-pastoral village where he grew up, deep in the Eastern Cape’s Amathole mountains. For tens of kilometres all around us are rolling green hills. One can’t help but imagine that this is just the kind of setting former president Thabo Mbeki had in mind when he penned the opening lines of his speech, *I am an African*, delivered in 1996, to an optimistic – and arguably naive – new South Africa: “I am an African. I owe my being to the hills and the valleys, the mountains and the glades, the rivers... that define the face of our native land. I am an African!”

Life in Ngobozana looks deceptively uninterrupted, slow, tranquil, betraying the fact that these very mountains and much of the surrounding Amathole range were the sites of some of the most protracted violent conflicts in the country’s history. From the 19th century part of the Frontier Wars, also known as the Xhosa Wars, fought on and off over a century, as the Xhosa and Khoi inhabitants of these mountains stood their ground against the European settlers, through to the apartheid-era forced removals in the 1960s, which saw families such as Dyalvane’s chased away from their ancestral lands to this part of the mountain.



Andile Dyalvane at the site of the old village, which was forcibly removed by the Apartheid government. Photo by Adriaan Louw for Southern Guild

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He points to a valley half a kilometre ahead: “I used to spend quite a lot of time down there by the river, collecting clay, or rather playing with clay, because as children we weren’t really collecting it, we were just supposed to be playing. But I would really find myself drawn to making objects with it. There was this feeling, like... amanwele – goosebumps, at certain moments. Then I would start hearing voices. I didn’t know what they meant, or what they were saying to me. But now, in retrospect, I see that these were the times when I was possibly being moulded by the ancestors, that they were sending me messages,” says Dyalvane.

Three days earlier, on the morning of Friday, 20 November 2020, trucks descended on the village, carrying the 18 sculptural pieces that make up iThongo, the 42-year-old artist’s latest exhibition, supported and presented by the two galleries that represent him – Southern Guild in Cape Town’s Silo District at the V&A Waterfront and Friedman Benda in New York. Up until that morning the work had not yet had a public exhibition. Its Cape Town gallery opening is set for 10 December 2020 at Southern Guild, followed by a 3 June 2021 opening at Friedman Benda.



Poet and traditional healer, Sisonke Papu, dances around the stool sculptures shortly after their arrival, during a ceremony to welcome and bless them before they are taken into the homestead’s kraal. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo



Left: 'Umnga' (Acacia tree). Right: 'iNkomo' (Cattle). Photo by Adriaan Louw for Southern Guild



Left to right: 'uYalezo' (Messages), 'eNtshonalanga' (Sunset), 'uMnga' (Acacia Tree), 'iNkomo' (Cattle).
Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo.

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The stool sculptures arranged inside the kraal. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo

“We’re often celebrated in faraway places, whereas back home they don’t get to experience what we do. Bringing this work here is a way of showing the community what I do. It is very important that they see and experience this; although they’ve seen my work on TV and in magazines, that’s just not the same energy as interacting with it. I want to restore dignity and bring pride to the community; I want the sons and daughters of this community to know that there’s someone out there making sure that they are recognised, they are never forgotten. I want them to know that no matter where we come from, it’s possible that our kids can be anything they want,” says Dyalvane.

His story is indeed an inspiring one. In 2004, the year after completing his diploma in ceramic design, his first major show at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town sold out. By 2006, he and ceramic artist Zizipho Poswa co-founded Imiso Ceramics, and that same year, ELLE DECO named him the winner in the ceramics category of their DECO Design Awards, the first of many accolades. In particular it was his take on traditional ceramic pots that was often talked about, specifically the way he used to incorporate the traditional Xhosa practice of facial scarification into the surface of the pots, causing the clay to spread like a precisely cut flesh wound, albeit a bloodless one.

Although his journey with clay stretches all the way back to childhood, he notes one particular moment, about a decade ago, as pivotal to how he has come to understand the purpose of his work. “About 10 or so years ago I brought one of the clay beer pots

home, as a gesture, to show my father what it is I do in Cape Town. I was also thinking about how we've replaced the traditional clay beer pot with either plastic or metal buckets. From my understanding of history, we were using Ingqayi (clay beer pot) before," explains Dyalvane. He drove "about 12 hours" from Cape Town, through the night, eventually making it home at dawn.

"The idea was simply to present the pot to my father. But I did ask my mother a week before to brew umqombothi (traditional beer) so that when I present it to him, it would be with the beer in it. When I arrived that morning, I just had this overwhelming feeling, this urge to get out of the car without unpacking anything and take the pot straight to the kraal. I got there and I started talking, thanking my ancestors for the guidance, and the safe journey, then and over the years," says Dyalvane



Umqombothi (traditional beer), served in one of Andile Dyalvane's pots at the ceremony. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo



Andile's brother, Madoda Dyalvane, crushes "iSilawu, a purifying herb".
Photo by Adriaan Louw for Southern Guild

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He then made umgquba, a mixture of cow manure and soil, and smeared the pot, “as a way of introducing and blessing it, like purifying it”. He poured the beer his mother had brewed before presenting it to his father: “He got so emotional. I hadn’t been home for nine months. On the one hand he was happy and surprised to see me, and also very proud because of the pot I was presenting him. But he also seemed shaken.”

As Dyalvane tells it, his father said he could not experience that moment alone, he instructed him to summon the elders, his uncles and his neighbours: “Tell them they must meet us here at four o’clock this afternoon.”

They came.

“When they saw the pot they were so taken aback. Some of the elders started remembering things they had forgotten from their childhoods. Some even remembered holding on to their mother’s umbhaco – isikhakha (cowhide skirt) to be specific, as kids; they remembered the smell of the oil and the fat from the hide. Some started dissecting the colours and patterns of the piece, and the scarification, which is something that is no longer practised that much.

“Then my father addressed them and said, ‘I’ve called you here because my son has arrived’. He was being literal in the sense that I had just travelled from Cape Town, but in retrospect I now recognise that there was a deeper meaning, because he went on to say, ‘you’re the one who is going to bring pride and dignity to our community, to our clan, to abantu, usibuyisele embo – to restore us to where we come from, restore what we’ve lost’. I was so young, I was so overwhelmed. How would I even go about carrying such a large purpose? How do I begin to restore dignity?”

But then he remembered how “overwhelmed” he’d always felt when working with clay, and how at different times specific individuals would be drawn to certain of his pieces, that even he didn’t quite understand. Says Dyalvane: “What I’ve also found over the years is that the work I’ve been doing has never really been about any specific trend. Much of it had come from the dreams and visions I had. And I’d get so overwhelmed and shaken, and the work has to come out. Only afterwards I would interrogate its meaning. Sometimes I may not even know what it means but I still had to create the work. Some people would look at those pieces and just cry, not knowing what to make of the emotions they were feeling at that time. And I came to recognise in those moments that even though I did not know or understand the meaning of the work, the message was for them, the viewer interacting with it, it was for them to realise.” He also notes that the viewer affected by the work is not necessarily synonymous with the collector who might be in a position to buy the work.



Andile Dyalvane and his wife, Nkuthazo Alexis Dyalvane. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo

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Even at that moment, “about 10 or so years ago”, as his community gathered around that pot, some cried. Since those days his work has grown, evolved, and attracted more attention. It is now part of numerous private and institutional collections, including the Vitra Design Museum in Germany, the Yingge Ceramic Museum in Taipei, and Iziko South African National Gallery. He has been part of numerous exhibitions and art fairs, and participated in residencies with leading pottery studios, such as his most recent 2019 residency at Leach Pottery studios in the UK, which was founded in 1920 and restored in 2008, and is widely regarded as having played a central role in the development of British pottery in the 20th century. And over the past 12 years, since joining the Southern Guild stable of artists and designers, he has presented four major exhibitions, each steadily evolving his practice.

While he was initially known primarily for his beer pots and other clay vessels, the work has increasingly become more sculptural. His 2016 exhibition, *Camagu*, already took the vessels into unfamiliar shapes, some altogether closed. By 2017, he presented *Idladla* (Grain Silo), an ode to the role maize cultivation plays in Xhosa culture, with some of the sculptures taking on more totemic shapes. And then his 2019 exhibition, *Selected Works from the Leach Pottery Residency*, which saw him return to vessels, albeit much evolved, displaying Dyalvane’s knack for pushing boundaries, while consistently managing to strike a delicate balance between tradition, storytelling and a progressive approach to technique.

Concurrently, as his star continued to rise, so did the role his work played back home, in Ngobozana. “If you recall, at some point back in the day, practising some elements of African spirituality was made a taboo and considered barbaric as Christianity and the church took over. Those who practised did so secretly. A lot of this thinking is still embedded in the minds of the elders. I’ve observed that since that day, some 15 years ago, when the elders and the community gathered together around that pot, the elders have continued to remember more.



Dyalvane made pots for each of the households in the village. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo



The pots get smoke-fired in the kraal. Photo by Adriaan Louw for Southern Guild.

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Ceramicist Madoda Fani, a close friend of Dyalvane's, is completing smoke-firing of the beer pots. Far right: 'uMama' (Mother). Photo by Adriaan Louw for Southern Guild.

"They've reinstated cultural ceremonies they had stopped practising. At some point they started saying that they felt they were not dressed appropriately enough in their 'Western gear' to be around this pot during traditional ceremonies. They started incorporating traditional beadwork, and other traditional clothing items; and they started singing certain kinds of songs they had remembered, to evoke the spirit of the ancestors during ceremonies," says Dyalvane.

He credits these changes in his family, the return to cultural practices once forgotten, as evidence of his father's words about his purpose, and as an ongoing revelation of how he can use his work to "restore that which was lost". Along with the sculptures to be displayed in his family homestead over the weekend, and inspired by the changes the clay pot has brought to his family, he has made a clay pot for each home in his village.

He is also planning to spend much of 2022 building an art centre at the village and passing on his skills, not merely as a way for people to potentially make a living, but also as a form of healing: "It's not about a workshop environment, and simply teaching people how to make objects with clay. It's a whole spiritual process and experience when you're within it, because it taps into all the tools that one uses to evoke emotion so that the work can come through

“Over the years I started realising that I have always been on this journey, guided by the echoes and voices; ever since I used to come back home naked and covered in clay as a young boy. It has dawned on me that this is a very important role that has been entrusted to me by the ancestors. It is a spiritual calling.”

For his latest body of work, iThongo, which literally means ancestral dreamscape, the 18 sculptures take the form of stools and benches. “What’s fascinating about this is that it was not the visions of the stools that came first, because sometimes I get the vision of the finished object, but this time I received the visions of the symbols. They would come so strongly while I was sitting, sleeping or busy practising something. At that time I’d been to Taipei and had started practising calligraphy, so I was also working on my ink brushmanship. So I started illustrating the symbols as they came,” he explains.

Although Dyalvane says that the pieces that make up his shows don’t necessarily come from gallerists and curator suggestions, but this time the idea to translate the work into stools came from his two galleries. He explains: “On any other day no one guides me to do such. It has to come from me, as to what it is I need to do. But this time I was like... ‘Wow, that’s amazing. Yes! That’s it’. And the reason I agreed on the stools was that I remembered back when I was a young student I came across these wooden headrests and stools that people would carry with them and use to sleep, or just lie down and rest their heads. They believed that those stools were a good way of connecting to the ancestral dreamscape. I then realised that each stool I create should carry a specific message, hence each has a specific symbol.”

And now, the body of work complete and having made its way from his studio in Cape Town to Ngobozana, comes off the trucks, with the Southern Guild gallery’s owners and their team unpacking, Dyalvane’s family and neighbours at the gate to welcome it, singing, dancing, burning impepho herbs to, as Dyalvane’s brother, Madoda Dyalvane, put it, “purify it of any evil spirits that it might have picked up on the journey”. Eventually the pieces would make their way into the family’s kraal, later that day, in preparation for the following day’s ceremony.

After the weekend the pieces will soon occupy coveted spaces in rarefied galleries, and some will eventually land in the private collections of the well heeled.

However, for this weekend, they sit on the grass outside the house for a while, then on the ground outside the kraal, then in the kraal. Here they look beautiful, striking, fitting; and at the same time, not as untouchable artworks, objects to be admired from a distance as they would be in a typical gallery space. Members of the community and the family sit on them and complement their beauty. Children freely climb on them. A member of the gallery’s team smiles and giggles nervously, and asks a child climbing on one to do so carefully; the kid ignores her and climbs on.

The following day, on Saturday, 21 November, one of the sculptures, uMalusi (Shepherd), is placed on a newly built cement plinth, on a spot on the hill almost a kilometre from the village. The spot is significant to Dyalvane. “The story goes that around 1965, as part of the apartheid state’s forced removals, my grandfather and his family were chased from their lands over that hill, carrying a few belongings. Their artefacts, beads, clay pots; they couldn’t take any of that with them, it was all demolished or burnt down. They didn’t have fences back then, they built their homesteads with enough space for cows to graze freely, but now they were not only being moved from their lands, they were also fenced off into these little rectangles. My grandfather refused to move, he died there.”



Dyalvane ‘smudges’ a sculpture, ‘uMalusi’ (Shepherd) to purify its energy before carrying it up to the hilltop where it will be installed overlooking ancestral burial grounds. Photo by Adriaan Louw for Southern Guild.



'uMalusi' (Shepherd), installed on a plinth overlooking ancestral burial grounds. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo



Left to right, Dyalvane's family: Nephews Sinethemba Dyalvane, Mawabo Dyalvane, and son Khanya Phekezela. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo



Far left: Dyalvane's uncle, Zoyisile Dyalvane, left: Junior Dyalvane (nephew), right: Andile Dyalvane

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Left to right: Andile Dyalvane's mother, Mam' Nofezekile Dyalvane, family friend Noncedo Mrwetyana, his wife Nkuthazo Alexis Dyalvane and their son, and sister in law Nophelo Dyalvane. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo

This spot will soon be fenced off, aloes will be planted around it, and the sculpture will remain a permanent fixture, a memorial. The family walks up the hill to the spot on Saturday morning for a ceremony, to commune with the ancestors. They sing, and take turns to walk around the sculpture, each verbally asking for guidance and blessings on a specific matter from the ancestors.

"For me, during this time, when everyone is so frustrated under lockdown and anxious about Covid, my message is about hope, love and restoration. So while I was in Cape Town and Southern Guild was still negotiating an opening date with Friedman Benda, I also thought of these challenges that people are dealing with at this time, especially at home in Ngobozana. Then I also thought that the experience of this offering would be a beautiful tool to elevate people's spirits, that instead of worrying about a formal gallery gathering, this is actually what is needed here. And Southern Guild agreed."

From then on the project continued to grow, to incorporate a musical composition by "sound healer and musician Nkosenathi Ernie Koela", and "Sisonke Papu, an Umatata-based poet and traditional healer and co-founder of the ISIPILI Network in the Eastern Cape, wrote about Dyalvane's use of symbology for the catalogue, and textile artist Onesime Bam made a collection of garments hand-painted in indigo dye for [Dyalvane]

to wear for the ceremonial presentation of his work to his village and to gift to his elders.”

The work will also be accompanied by a documentary of the weekend’s ceremony. While for Dyalvane his work may be part of his spiritual calling, and the resulting physical manifestations of messages received in the ancestral dreamscape, it would be naive to forget that on the other hand, within the art industrial complex, these pieces will sell for the kind of prices far out of reach for well over 99% of South Africans, and certainly that is true for the residents on Ngobozana. The documentary itself will also go a long way towards enticing those potential collectors and increasing the value of the work.



Andile Dyalvane’s brother, Madoda Dyalvane. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo



Andile Dyalvane dances during the blessing ceremony. Photo by Malibongwe Tyilo

“Yes, exhibiting and selling the work and all of that has to happen. But for me it was important that the whole process, and the narrative that informs the work be documented, not just for collectors. It’s important that everything be accessible for the community, future generations, schoolkids and libraries. It’s very important that the wealth of knowledge be shared.

“When it comes to galleries and museums, the documentary and the catalogue will be important to give context to the work. I want them to know where it comes from, the message and energy it carries, and the people whose culture it represents. They need to know what is happening here, what is lost and what needs to be restored. And this goes beyond my family and community; you’ll often find that between us and Aboriginal people and Native Americans, we’re all faced with similar issues. So this is for First-Nation people all over the world who have suffered similarly to South Africans, from whom so much has been taken, and who are in need of restoration,” explains Dyalvane. DM/ML