



BEYOND WORDS

South African ceramic artist Andile Dyalvane has created his own language of symbols that draws on his cultural heritage in the Eastern Cape while speaking across geographic and social divides. Nkgopoleng Moloi visits him ahead of his travelling solo show. Photography by Antonia Steyn

Andile Dyalvane is a storyteller who revels in the texture of a tale – for him, specificity is the soul of the narrative. These stories, which shape the forms and richly patterned surfaces of his ceramic sculptures and vessels, are profound and complex, and he is generous with them. In a café close to his studio in Salt River, Cape Town, they pour out of him and I drink them in.

Many of those that Dyalvane – one of South Africa's leading ceramic artists – shares with me are about acts of giving, communal gathering and healing, which are central to his work. They stem from his experiences in Ngobozana, the small village in the Eastern Cape where he was born but later left to study in Cape Town. He tells me how, 10 years ago, he crafted a clay vessel to take home to his father as a gift. This hand-coiled pot, made for drinking beer brewed by his mother, was inspired by traditional artefacts that were once ubiquitous in the village. 'The terracotta and *imbola* (red ochre) tones recalled the earth I grew up seeing,' he says. '*Imbola* is also used as a face mask in the village, and the vessel's markings and patterns resembled the old regalia made from animal skin that Xhosa women would wear.' Moved by this gift, Dyalvane's father said, 'I cannot enjoy it alone', and summoned the rest of the village to join him. During this gathering, people shared pleasant and painful memories, including recollections of the village being displaced, which severed its relationship to the land. It is this severance the artist seeks to heal in his work.

'Objects help us remember where we came from, recalling the stories, the songs and the old ways,' explains Dyalvane, who grew up looking after his father's cattle – an experience that forged in him a respect for his Majola clan and the Xhosa culture of the Eastern Cape, as well as *umhlaba* (mother earth). 'My work is about restoring dignity to people, so they can experience and acknowledge traditional cultures without the fear of being labelled "backwards".'

The patination that marks his sculptures and stoneware vessels might be specific, but the messages it conveys about the importance of place, community and the life-affirming energy of the earth resonate widely in an increasingly disconnected world: one in which rural and indigenous traditions are being stripped away. Today his work can be found in collections as far afield as the Vitra Design Museum in Germany and the Yingge Ceramic Museum in Taipei, as well as in Cape Town's Iziko South Africa National Gallery, and has been exhibited across the world. 'It has been interesting to witness how the more Andile's work has focused on his own Xhosa legacy, the more powerfully it speaks to a broader cross-section of people,' says Trevyn McGowan, co-founder of Cape Town's Southern Guild, which has represented Dyalvane for years. 'This level of articulation is made possible by an unerring dedication to his craft, but it is grounded in an intentionality and open-hearted desire for human connection.'

Dyalvane's latest body of work, *iThongo*, meaning 'ancestral dreamscape', is a collection of 18 ceramic stools,



Previous page: Dyalvane in his studio. Right: the artist seated on *uMnga* (acacia tree), and top to bottom: *iGubu* (drum), *uLwazi* (knowledge) and *iZilo* (totem animal), all from *iThongo* collection

Artworks: photos Adrian Louw, courtesy of Southern Guild



‘Objects help us remember where we came from, recalling the stories, the songs and the old ways. My work is about restoring dignity to people’

chairs and benches, designed to be arranged in a circle around a fire, in the custom of Xhosa ceremonial gatherings. At the time of writing, the work – made partly at his home during the COVID-19 lockdown and partly in his studio – was set to travel in its entirety to Ngobozana for his family to experience them, before returning to Cape Town for a solo show at Southern Guild (until 5 February). In June it will be exhibited at the Friedman Benda gallery in New York.

Hand-coiled in terracotta clay, the stools’ rounded bases give way to sculptural backrests that rise up to almost a metre – inspired by traditional Xhosa headrests, which are believed to function as channels through which ancestors can communicate messages. Dyalvane’s aim was to ‘highlight a gathering of dreams, seated in the soul, held by the spirits of our ancestors’. Each seat’s form is based on a single pictogram or glyph from around 200 symbols that he has created to denote words important to Xhosa life, including *umalusi* (herdsman), *igubu* (drum) and *izolo* (totem animals). These symbols also mark their surfaces. Dyalvane uses tools, such as carved stamps and linocut tiles to deboss them into the seating, echoing the ancient African tradition of body scarification, something he has referenced since co-founding Imiso Ceramics, known for its handmade tableware and vessels, with artist Zizipho Poswa in 2005.

Dyalvane’s work celebrates commonality and difference. ‘The forms of each symbol are distilled to an almost abstract essence that communicates across cultures and spoken language,’ explains McGowan. ‘*iThongo* is an invitation to sit down and listen, to bear witness to one another and the passage of time. It is an assertion of Black pride and of our shared humanity, irrespective of creed or colour.’



Photos: Adrian Louw, courtesy of Southern Guild

When we speak, Dyalvane is preparing to travel to Ngobozana, to present *iThongo*. He plans to gift his community 90 traditional beer pots imprinted with the *iThongo* symbol – a nod to that poignant moment 10 years ago. Where Dyalvane comes from, gifts are tokens that surpass their material worth, imbued with the spirit of the giver, to be enjoyed communally. ‘Each person will take a pot home, as my way of planting a seed and restoring lost heritage,’ says the artist, who left Ngobozana at the age of 18 to study for a National Diploma in Art and Design at Sivuyile Technical College in Gugulethu, Cape Town, then a National Diploma in Ceramic Design from Port Elizabeth Technikon in 2003. ‘It’s about giving thanks through the practice of *ubuntu*, which reminds us we are contributing members of a larger community.’

When the *iThongo* exhibition arrives at Friedman Benda, it will be a follow-up to his acclaimed solo show in 2016, *Camagu* (loosely translating as ‘I am grateful’ – a mantra he stamps on many of his works). ‘With *Camagu*, Andile explored his place between the cosmopolitan urban centre of Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, where he was raised,’ says Jennifer Olshin, a founding partner at Friedman Benda. ‘With *iThongo*, he presents us with an entire worldview. With incredibly honed skill and execution, he uses local stories and sacred ideas to create powerful ceramic parables that are literally applicable to the greater human condition.’

Another set of ceramic seating by Dyalvane from his most ambitious body of work to date, *Idladla* (grain silo, shown at Southern Guild in 2017), has also just been transported to Xigera, a new safari lodge in Botswana’s Okavango Delta, with artworks by 80 artists across the African continent,

Opposite: Dyalvane and members of his family gather in the *kraal* enclosure at his homestead to celebrate the *iThongo* collection arriving in Ngobozana. Above: an aerial view of the ceramic seating arranged in the *kraal* for the ceremonies





‘Residencies are an important opportunity for an exchange of culture, as well as for learning new skills’



Previous page: Dyalvane sketching in his studio.
Top: *Idladla* (grain silo), and above: *Imithombo* (corn yeast) and *Ushongo* (roasted corn powder), from the *Idladla* (grain silo) collection. Right: making chair models

commissioned or curated in collaboration with Southern Guild. Their highly decorative surfaces – with precise incisions and hand imprints – take cues from architecture in cities as distant as New York and Bamako, and speak of the cyclical practices of land cultivation and seasonal food that are part of daily life in the rural Eastern Cape. Guests will be encouraged to sit on the stools – with names like *Ugcado* (roasted corn kernels) and *Umdlungu* (spoilt corn) – and contemplate their connection to the earth.

Dyalvane has long explored the bounty of the land and the ‘soil erosion and the textures and revelations this creates’, he says. In 2019 he did a residency at the Leach Pottery in St Ives. After hearing how potters threw their rejected pots in the River Stennack beside the building, he decided to incorporate the shards in his vessels. ‘In another piece, I explored bark textures from alongside the Stennack and used gritty inclusions of wood ash from the fireplace in the old pottery,’ says the artist. The hand-built vessels, featuring overlapping layers of textured clay, were shown in his exhibition *Our Cultures in Constant Collaboration* at the Leach Pottery in 2019, then at Southern Guild last year. He credits the eight-week residency – one of a string he has done in international institutions – with giving his work a new freedom, while heightening his commitment to exploring his spiritual lineage. ‘Residencies are an important opportunity for an exchange of culture, a collaboration with the environment, as well as for learning new skills,’ he says. ‘They also broaden my understanding of the world at large and how other people operate with the resources that they have.’

As we speak, philosophical parallels between Bernard Leach and Dyalvane become clear. Leach believed pottery to be a way of connecting the hand and heart, and Dyalvane centres collaboration, people and stories within his work. Both artists’ creative foundations began with sketching: Leach etching at the Slade School of Fine Art and Dyalvane drawing during his early days at the Sivuyile Technical College. Today his work still begins with a sketch. Like Leach, Dyalvane is also an ardent teacher. He has taken his masterclasses, *Clay Adventures with Andile Dyalvane*, across the world. ‘They are less about teaching people how to make clay objects but rather about the energy that is transferred through the process of interacting with clay and using it as a way to express oneself,’ he says.

Music is another form of energy that feeds into his practice, triggering thoughts and movements that influence the work. ‘How the song moves my body – whether it’s by [African musicians] Fela Kuti or Salif Keita – shapes the form of the object,’ he says. For the *iThongo* exhibition, he invited musician Nkosenathi Ernie Koela to compose a piece combining traditional instruments and sounds created by artworks. Just as music infuses matter in these works, all of Dyalvane’s practice is characterised by duality, and a mingling of traditions with contemporary processes. Moreover, the pieces in *iThongo* extend his continuing interest in history, language, memory and the restoration of dignity. Although his work is rooted in the legacy of Xhosa traditions, its contours are flexible. It finds a way to move between cultures and between times without insisting on any particular one. southernguild.co.za

Artworks photos Adriaan Louw, courtesy of Southern Guild

