

# The Business Life/Arts & Entertainment

## 'Chameleon artist' takes on the world

The former herd boy who dabbled in clay takes his inspiration as a ceramicist from his surroundings, writes **Penny Haw**

**T**HE view from the Imiso Ceramics studio on the fourth floor of Flex-More House in Woodstock is not one you'll find replicated on postcards from Cape Town. Sizeable windows look across an unremarkable mishmash of industrial roofs onto the working section of the city's harbour, where containers, cranes and cargo vessels provide angular outlines against the ocean.

But, while it's unlikely it will ever rival Table Mountain as an iconic view of the Mother City, variations of the scene are increasingly making their way around the world as art collectors purchase ceramic interpretations of the industrial skyline created by young ceramicist Andile Dyalvane.

Working at a large bench in the back corner of the studio—where the view is at its most expansive—Dyalvane uses an intriguing array of tools to recreate the scene on his elegant range of earthenware vases, pots, bowls and platters. And, as if bringing the site into the studio, many of the implements he uses are discarded bits and pieces he's collected in and around the harbour. The imprints of a tiny plastic gear become the hydraulic wheels of the crane. A sharp nail slices the image of a steel cable into the clay, simultaneously creating the scarring mark that is considered the artist's signature.

Although the view may have changed a number of times, Dyalvane has been translating his surroundings into art for as long as he can remember. Born in Ngobozana, near Qobooqo in the Eastern Cape, the signature scarification mark is reminiscent of the scarring of human flesh that follows the Xhosa "ukuqatshulwa" ritual. Even then a master improviser, he first experimented in clay while watching his father's cattle as a young boy; using sticks, stones, plants and whatever else he could find to create images and make patterns in the earth. He also drew endless pictures.

"I've always drawn," Dyalvane says, paging through a leather-bound book full of detailed sketches and designs he's doodled while on the train, in waiting rooms and on the phone. "I believe if I can draw it, I can create it. And, if my hands are not busy with clay, they're busy with a pencil or pen."

It was his talent for drawing that motivated Dyalvane's older brother to bring the then 18-year-old to Cape Town and enrol him at Skuyville Technical College in Gugulethu. But it was only during field trips to craft shops and galleries that he realised he could make a living as an artist: "I saw that if you were original and prepared to work hard, people would buy



IMPROVISER:  
Ceramicist  
Andile Dyalvane  
in the Imiso  
Ceramics studio  
in Woodstock,  
Cape Town.  
Picture: TREVOR  
SAMSON

your art. That was exciting because I loved to create and I knew it would make me happy."

After graduating top of his class with a diploma in art and design, Dyalvane went on to work with ceramic artist Chris Silverstone at the Potter's Shop in Kalk Bay. Even at that early stage of his career, his work began to evolve according to his surroundings.

"Someone once referred to me as a 'chameleon artist': my art reflects the world around me. Put me in a different environment and I will soak up what I see and reflect it. It happens involuntarily. At that time, my work was less influenced by what I remembered of the Eastern Cape and more so by the sea."

In 2001, Silverstone helped Dyalvane co-ordinate a five-week trip to Denmark to participate in a workshop at the International Ceramics Centre in Guldagergard. It was here, he says, that his work became more sophisticated and he learnt to make more graceful statements with greater use of white.

His talent was spotted by Charmaine Haines, who was, at the time, a lecturer in ceramic design at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, in Port Elizabeth. She encouraged Dyalvane to take up a scholarship at the university and to further his studies in ceramic design. When three of his

pieces, made for his graduation show, were purchased by the South African National Museum, he realised his career as an artist was truly on track.

In 2004, he held a solo exhibition at the Irma Stern Museum in Cape Town, which was sold out. Since then, he's been named a Design Icon and Master Crafter by the Cape Craft and Design Institute; was a finalist in the Young International Design Entrepreneur of the Year Awards in 2009; and won an international award in the ceramic category in a competition organised by Elle Decoration magazine.

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About five years ago, Dyalvane established Imiso Ceramics with three other artists and entrepreneurs. Although two of the original partners have moved on to other businesses, he and Zizipho Poswa, an accomplished ceramic artist and businesswoman, continue to operate the studio in Albert Road, Woodstock, and the Imiso Ceramics shop in the Old Biscuit

Mill nearby. "The arrangement works well. Zizipho and my wife handle most of the business aspects of the operation, which frees me up to feed my creative side. I know it is very important to pay good attention to the marketing and administrative aspects of business to succeed as an artist, but I am pleased to have other capable people to take care of those things for me. I am happiest and most productive when I can create."

The shop is an effective showroom for his art and Poswa's more functional, "gifty" pieces. It also provides referrals for commissioned work, including a current project that involves Dyalvane transferring his harbour scenes onto leather. The huge canvasses will become headboards for the beds on a luxury yacht.

"I enjoy being challenged to do things differently."

"Working in leather is exciting because I've had to experiment with different techniques and test myself by trying new things. I hope it's going to be something I can do more of."

In addition to showing his work at the shop at the Old Biscuit Mill and at overseas fairs, Dyalvane is represented by Amaridian Gallery in New York. His work is also available at Piece By Piece in Rosebank, Johannesburg. He and Poswa also participate in as many

relevant trade shows as possible. "Locally, we attend the Design Indaba and, internationally, we've been to events such as the New York Gift Show, Design Africa in Paris, and Top Drawer in London."

"It's hard work and expensive to participate in these kind of events, but we know if we are to continue to succeed, we need to show our work to as broad an audience as possible. And then, when we're home, we have to follow up on all the interest and

leads we received at the exhibitions. There's as much work to be done after the events are over as there is before."

But the hard work and wide exposure are paying off: "When we first began exhibiting overseas, people were surprised by my work. They said things like, 'But we thought Africans only made masks'."

"But it's changed, and collectors are beginning to realise that we create many different artworks."

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