



**Clementina van der Walt**



Clementina van der Walt lives in St James in Cape Town overlooking False Bay. The view from her house is of the railway line, a tidal pool and the ever present sea, sometimes heaving with angry waves under the force of the South Easter, other times still and somnolent in the summer heat. Here on the western shores of False Bay with its Edwardian buildings restored and gentrified one is aware of another age and place; one that is not African in any essentialised notion of that word. This paradox of place echoes the conundrum of van der Walt's life and work. She was born in South Africa of European descent, her father a Jewish refugee from Lithuania. Her birth place is in Africa, yet she feels displaced, alien. Still "Africa" as a concept remains her spiritual home and the inspirational source of her decorative language.

Van der Walt's latest body of work consists of panels made from small tiles mounted proud of the wall and assembled in a loose order. A phrase of poetry, a splash of colour or the African motifs provide the starting point for each group of tiles.

One of van der Walt's favourite sources of inspiration is *Afrikan Alphabets – The Story of Writing in Afrika*.<sup>1</sup> From this source van der Walt appropriates symbols, selected for their graphic qualities, that become part of a personal lexicon of mark making.

It is instructive to see how subtle this use of decorative

I hunger so  
for that  
landscape  
of  
intimate  
struggles ...

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language is, how simple marks are rhythmically impressed into the clay. Colour pools in the indentations and pulls away from the raised edges; small shadows are thus cast. The marks are soft and fluid reminding one of flesh and indeed they were made when the unfired clay was the consistency of soft tissue. Dry white or yellow ochre is brushed over the black underlying clay body. The tiles in their fired form are reminiscent of the fleshiness of both body and clay – a feeling enhanced by the fluidity of the hand-made line that delineates the boundary of the tile; that, and the less than perfect flatness of the surface, hints at body rather than rigid architectural structure. The tiles suggest, by the merest association, circumcision and scarification rituals.

The marks allude to a tradition more closely associated with ceramic practice of indigenous pottery. The raised elements reference the amasumpa on Zulu beer pots while the marks scratched though ochre overglaze to the black clay beneath echo the chevron patterning on such pots. Again the clay body bleeds through the over-lying whites and ochres suggesting the daubing of body as well as pot.

In many versions of her panels elements of poetry appear to provide the focal point and a key to the reading of the work. "Then they stole my home, my land, the possibility of my hands, my last dress," a phrase by the poet Karen Press<sup>2</sup> is written on a tile in *Roots and Memories*. Further phrases by Press, "I stored you against at my eyelids my

treasure," and "You can go back, back, back," give a key to a reading of the work which arose out of van der Walt's conversations with refugees she met in Cape Town. These are mostly young people from countries such as Malawi and the Congo. (One refugee is the model for one of the faces). Roots and Memories is about loss, regret and a longing for home; feelings of yearning that are reinforced in the artwork by the subdued palette of greys, browns and ochres.

The phrases of poetry are treated in much the same way as the African motifs. Van der Walt begins on the basis of respect and admiration for the source but re-frames the text for her own purposes. Like the African motifs, the words are decontextualised from the original basis and become the inspiration and the starting point for van der Walt's own private intuitive journey. Press, a friend and colleague of van der Walt is comfortable with this re-contextualisation of her work, as is Jeni Couzyn a London-based, South African poet whose work also functions as muse.

It is almost superfluous to point to van der Walt's mastery of her medium. In her ease with the way she manipulates material, comparisons can be drawn with the artist/potter Hylton Nel. Van der Walt, like Nel, succeeds in evoking memories of the living malleable quality of unfired clay in the fired form. The edges of the tiles are



Images: (page 2, detail) Untitled

Dimensions: 300cm x 150cm

2006

(page 4, detail) Inside a few jour-  
neys....

Dimensions: 180cm x 120cm

2006

(previous page, detail) Inside a few  
journeys....

Dimensions: 180cm x 120cm

2006

(this page) Memory

Medium: Ceramic

Dimensions: 70cm x 50cm

2006



cleaned of their covering colour. The resultant black line delineates the tiles like the soft charcoal line of a hand-drawn mark. The surfaces of the tiles are similarly not linear. They undulate with memories of their unfired form. Thus while the works allude to flatness they speak a three-dimensional sculptural language. This three dimensionality is exhibited in some case in the modelled form of mask-like faces that rise from the surface of the tile. In other tiles masks are delineated by a single outline and little modelling.

I asked van der Walt what surely is a rhetorical question: Could she envision the tiles being set into the wall like conventional tiles? The answer predictably was in the negative. Not only would the hand-drawn line be negated by burying the tiles in a plaster screed, but the shadows cast by each small square would also be erased. The mounting of the tiles proud of the wall is a carefully considered formal decision – the shadows form just one of the many elements that make up the whole.

Van der Walt's panels function as architectural interventions. The units of tile work as multiples enabling van der Walt to expand or contract the size of the work according to the specificity of site. The murals thereby function not only as contemplative artworks in which pattern, image and text interact, but also as decorative interventions in built spaces.

<sup>1</sup> Mafundikwa, Saki. 2004. *Afrikan Alphabets – The Story of Writing in Afrika*. New Jersey: Mark Batty Publisher LLC.

<sup>2</sup> Press, Karen. 2000. *Home*. Manchester: Carcanet Press.

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- ⊕ - Graskop
- ⊕ - Dullstroom
- ⊕ - Pretoria - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Irene - Tshwane
- ⊕ - Richmond
- ⊕ - Cape Town