



Robert Hodgins



**Lay your sleeping head, my love,
Human on my faithless arm;**

Lullaby, W.H. Auden

Text by Retief van Wyk

To say that Robert Hodgins keeps more than one mistress would not be completely incorrect. We know Hodgins as the celebrated painter and graphic artist, yet little is known about his other great love, ceramics. For the past seventeen years Hodgins has practised ceramics for the sole purpose of creating images of those strange beings that comprise the human race. He claims not to take the exercise too seriously but the results are important to him. He is constantly developing or 'discovering' new approaches to picture making—painting, modeling or forming images to convey figures and ideas.

Whilst acting as external examiner for painting at the University of Natal, Hodgins introduced himself to me as a Johannesburg artist in exile in Pretoria. It was the summer of 1988 and I was then lecturing at the ceramics department at the same university. The following year, back in Pretoria, Hodgins discovered and fell in

love with the seemingly effortless style of painting on ceramics. He soon invited the artist Deborah Bell to join him in his new venture and this invitation ignited her interest for the ceramic medium, an interest that is still evident today. Hodgins took (and still takes) all the ceramic craft constraints for granted and pushes the boundaries deep into the surface of the clay. The dry clay offers a surface to paint on and also to draw into and is, as he puts it, "sometimes an opportunity and also an irritating disadvantage". Ceramic painting resembles methods used in tempera painting where colours are built up in layers. Line and brushwork are intermingled and images appear and, with rapid scouring, slowly disappear. Hodgins observes that "one can add and invent [in a way that is not] possible on a canvas."

On the other hand, wet plates offer the opportunity to work impasto, so that one is "moving the paint around" into the wet clay surface. Once the plates are dry they may be worked again. Hodgins experiments with all the

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Image: (left) MR..., 2005, (right) ...AND MRS, 2005

Medium: Underglaze and enamel on porcelain

Diameter: (left) 23cm, (right) 23,3cm

possible surfaces and forms, from coffee mugs to vases, three-dimensional skull forms to figurative objects, with the round plate remaining a favourite.

Hodgins's plates are portraits in the round. The format is of no major concern to him although the circular throwing lines sometimes lead him into a specific direction or gesture. The circular possibility of banding (painting of colours in the round) is usually only decided on after the images are completed. Some plates may take weeks to finish and others are completed almost instantly.

The lack of spatial reference is important in Hodgins's ceramic work. "The plates in themselves are objects to me," Hodgins suggests. "They occupy space and to also allude to space seems superfluous. The canvas on the other hand is a square flat plane that receives a frame and is different to plates that already have an obvious rim." The rim, however, also forms part of the picture... sometimes. There is never a hard and fast rule with Hodgins. Today it can be decorative rims only and next week the rims are completely negated.

Image: A GIRL PERTURBED, 2005
Medium: Underglaze and enamel on porcelain
Diameter: 31,8cm





"Always keep it fresh, my dear boy. It is infinitely variable," he adds. Sometimes a theme may be revisited or a technique reapplied or enhanced upon. The same image is never used twice.

This valuable private collection of ceramic portraits shows South Africa's leading oil painter manipulating another medium and format to produce compelling work. The ceramics on show reflect the joyous spirit of a serious artist at play and offer a glimpse of an artistic love affair of consequence.

Image: MOLLY, 2005

Medium: Underglaze and enamel on porcelain

Diameter: 29,6cm

Image: (right) MIAMI CHAPS, 2005
Medium: Underglaze and enamel on porcelain
Diameter: 32,9cm

following pages

Image: (left) FOOTBALL JOCK, 2005
(right) WAVING ... NOT DROWNING, 2005
Medium: Underglaze and enamel on porcelain
Diameter: (left) 37,2cm, (right) 34cm

Image: (left) READY FOR PARADE, 2005
(right) OU MAAT, 2005
Medium: Underglaze and enamel on porcelain
Diameter: (left) 36,8cm, (right) 30,8cm

Image: (left) REDCAP, 2005
(right) UNE VRAI MADAME, 2005
Medium: (left) Underglaze and enamel on porcelain
(right) Underglaze pencil
Diameter: (left) 31,8cm, (right) 29,5cm









Map - South Africa

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Artist: Robert Hodgins
Concept: Harrie Siertsema
Co-ordination: Abrie Fourie



Robert Hodgins, Pretoria, 2006

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