MATTER AND SPIRIT:

EARLY 21ST CENTURY FUNERAL URNS FOR
THE QUICK AND THE DEAD. WENDY COLEMAN

Documentation and commentary on the body of practical work presented for the degree of Master of Fine Art at the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town.

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DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Significant contribution to and quotation in this dissertation from the work or works of other people has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.
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MATTER AND SPIRIT: EARLY 21ST CENTURY FUNERAL URNS FOR THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

When I was twenty-five I married a farmer from the Eastern Cape. I gave up living in a city, and saw myself spending the rest of my life in the country, involved in the concerns of mixed stock farming in a semi-arid region of South Africa.

My life changed utterly when I was thirty-two with the sudden and unexpected death of my husband.

I became again a city-dweller, a teacher, with three young children.

The circumstances of my life have forced me to confront the reality of death, and to wrestle with the nature of my relationships with people whom I love, both those alive and those dead. The untimely death of my husband forced upon me a realisation of mortality, and an understanding that every relationship has a beginning and an end. Each relationship one has determines a role for oneself, as daughter, mother, wife, widow, as well as a changing understanding of one's own identity.

Prior to embarking on this MFA I had been working with clay and reading in the history of ceramics. From my reading it was evident that the making of objects in clay had long been associated with burial practices in cultures all over the world. As my interest in making really large clay vessels grew I came to see that in making these vessels I could place myself as an object maker within this long tradition. In so doing I could make urns—funeral urns in a sense—that could memorialise my own relationships to specific individuals. Obviously these vessels are funeral urns in a metaphorical sense only as these pots will never actually be used as burial vessels. Metaphorically they seek to symbolise our changing nature as individuals and to celebrate the lives which they represent and my relationships with the people concerned. Clay is an earth material, and because I was using this material I also wanted to make a connection with the earth itself, and with the life of humankind upon the earth.

A physical death signals a major change in patterns of relatedness, but our lives are filled with little deaths, with change and resurrection, as we move towards our own experience of physical death. In a broader sense then I wish these vessels to speak also of the nature of this changing world, both the physical world which over geological time endlessly "dies and is resurrected", and of the world of personal relationships where we find ourselves, changing inhabitants of this changing world.

St Paul, the early Christian apostle, in writing to the church at Corinth, expressed this notion when he said "I die every day" (1 Corinthians 15:31).

I have called this exhibition Early 21st century funeral urns for the quick and the dead. Seven of the urns memorialise individuals, some dead, most not, each of whom is important to me. Two speak of a broader inevitable connection with the land, and of the part we play within the context of the changing nature of the landscape itself. In so doing I have attempted to construct a memorial for those relationships important to me. The urns thus serve as repositories of memory, as physical constructs which speak of relationship.

The death of another person can radically change one's status and identity: in my case from farmer's wife to widow, from country person to city-dweller, and now, as I present this exhibition, it seems to me to represent the current stage in my changing notion of who I am, from farmer's wife to artist. Who knows what deaths and resurrections lie ahead for us all?
INTRODUCTION

SECTION ONE: ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT

This document serves as an introduction to the exhibition. What is "read" there forms the major part of what I have to say.

The exhibition comprises pots, chairs, and a variety of other smaller objects.

The identification of the pot with the person has a long history in ceramics. Pots are made for specific purposes or for specific people. Pots are frequently named for parts of the human body - the neck, the belly, the foot. I have made large vessels which reflect upon the lives of a number of people whom I love, the quick and the dead. The writer of Ecclesiasticus (one of the apochryphal Books of Wisdom) in his eulogy for the dead says this:

Now let us praise illustrious men,
Our ancestors in their successive generations.

He goes on to enumerate kings, prophets, teachers, musicians and many others of whom he says:

All these were honoured by their contemporaries
and were the glory of their day.
Some of them left a name behind them,
so that their praises are still sung.

He concludes poignantly:

While others have left no memory,
and disappeared as though they had not existed,
they are now as though they had never been,
and so too, their children after them (Ecclesiasticus 44:1, 7 - 10).

In building these physical objects which have an existence in time and space separate from my own I have sought to memorialise the times and phases of my own life and the lives of others dear to me that we should not be found to "have left no memory".

The making of a series of ceramic chairs followed the making of the urns, one to accompany each pot. In addition to these I made numerous smaller objects which would exist inside the pots, on the chairs, and on the floor alongside the urns and chairs. These smaller objects speak of the changing phases of my own life, and memorialise the "lives" and "deaths" of those others represented in this exhibition. This notion of associating various stages of life with aspects of potting is found also in West Africa. Nigel Barley says that "potting is tied into a great model that links together human birth, growth, death and the cycle of the year into a pattern that informs all areas of the lives of the Dowayo people" (1994:89). In associating chairs and other objects with the urns I have sought to make tangible the wide range of experience which this exhibition deals with.

I see pots as being essentially containers. Pots have been made to contain food, to hold water, to contain possessions, and sometimes, to contain the body (and the spirit) after death. In building funeral urns for people who are important to me I have made a series of vessels which are quintessentially containers - vessels which "contain" the attributes and spirit of the person for whom they were designed. Each one speaks of the person. I have used the urns in this exhibition also as storage spaces in that I have presented them in conjunction with other objects which reside within them. They are thus repositories of memory and of information. Many of the vessels have writing imprinted onto them - writing is itself also a system of preserving memories and information across time and space.
In introducing the exhibition I begin with some reflections on death, as the specific death mentioned in the preface can be seen as the seed from which this work has grown. These reflections derive from works of poetry and from the writings of philosophers; the selection I have made is narrative and reflects my own individual journey of discovery. As such it is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the literature in this field.

The section on funerary art which follows is a similar idiosyncratic selection, and concentrates mainly on art which is made in ceramic materials.

In my reading I sought to discover a context for myself as an artist working within the western world at the turn of the century. The artists whom I refer to as having influenced my own work are three whose work evoked in me a sense of kinship. Although they differ one from another they have in common that they are sculptors dealing with materials, using them to make physical constructs. There is an obvious physicality in the work of these three sculptors. In addition to this all three use the material world to speak at the same time of the physical world itself and of transcendence.

Although my own work does not resemble the work of any of the sculptors referred to, the duality of matter and spirit is an issue of which I too have wished to speak. That all three sculptors referred to are male, and British, seems to me to be merely a curious co-incidence.

The meaning inherent in the work that I have done depends very much on the nature of the material I have used: had I worked in plaster, or wood, or metal, the connotations would have been very different. I have thus included a section in this document which seeks to deal with the nature of the material with which I have been engaged, clay.

The second section of this document is a discussion of the works which I am presenting for exhibition.
SOME REFLECTIONS ON DEATH

Rainer Maria Rilke

Death is great
and we are his
with laughing lips.
When we think we’re in the
middle of life
he dares to weep
in the middle of us
(Rilke http/#!/www).

The literature on the subject of death constitutes a very wide field. Medical pathologists describe death in great detail from a physiological point of view, detailing cause and moment of death. Sociologists and psychologists, (for example, the psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross) deal with the experiential aspects, and offer methods for coming to terms with the process of dying and of loss. Anthropologists (like Nigel Barley) document the varieties of ways of dealing with death and burial in cultures around the world. There is also a vast body of religious writings as death is one of the fields explored by all religions.

The French philosopher Francois Dastur says that 'the conquering of death is the aim not only of metaphysics, which makes claims to a knowledge of the suprasensible and the non-corruptible, but also of religion, in so far as this promises a personal afterlife: of science, which makes the validity of a truth independent of the mortals who think it; and more generally of the whole of human culture, since this is based essentially upon the transmissibility of techniques which constitute the lasting resource of a community extending across several generations' (Dastur 1996:2). In this document I have not chosen to look at all of these areas, but have focussed briefly on the writings of a few philosophers and poets. This selection, as I mentioned in the Introduction, is idiosyncratic and personal, and reflects my own journey of discovery as I read in this field.

What is death? Medical writings describe the mechanics and moment of death, and advances in technology and science see an endless shifting of these parameters. Because establishing what death actually is has become very complex in medical terms, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish the moment of death, and a legal definition of death is thus also problematic. The question of death becomes a question of personal identity. In what does the identity of a person consist? At what point in time do we recognise that this identity has ceased to be? What happens at the time of physical death? What dies? And what, if anything, survives? In what does the essence of our personhood consist, and is there any way that this essential component can survive the experience of death? The following section of text seeks to deal with some of these questions.

The contemporary analytical philosopher, Jay Rosenberg, argues that there is no way that we can say with any degree of meaning that a person lives on after his/her death. He argues a notion of personhood which precludes the possibility of personal immortality: "People are what you meet. What you meet is the whole living, breathing, thinking, feeling organism that is a person, not something that might or might not have a 'soul' affiliated to it, and thus might or might not be a person" (Rosenberg 1998:126). He addresses himself to the question "Is there life after death?" and after lengthy argument concludes, no, because he can find no way possible for the person qua person to continue to live after the death of the body. If the question is rephrased as "does or could a person's history continue after that person's death?" that too he finds impossible because the terms of this question are linguistically inadmissible, and therefore the question is simply not answerable, either as yes or no.
Jon Davies claims that in the past 10 000 years of (recorded) history 100 billion people have died. Most without memorial, or without any specific individuation in memorial. According to Davies it is really only in the last few centuries that death ritual has been democratised, that ordinary people have been able to individualise their dead by taking personal control of death ritual. Although archaeology shows that most cultures went to great lengths to provide appropriate and lasting burials for their dead, most of the 100 billion are remembered as our generalised ancestors (Davies 1994:24).

No society has been uninterested in death, and no religion excludes "a more or less detailed explanation of death and its attendant mysteries" (Davies 1994:24). Where do the dead go? What are our relationships to the dead? How do our lives influence them, and their "lives" influence us? These questions are important to all societies.

Many cultures fear death, and many cultures also view death as the result of sin — vide the Aboriginal Australian myth of a garden with honey in a tree, desired by a woman, which taken, releases a bat from the tree whose touch causes death. The garden of Eden eating of the fruit of disobedience, mediated also by a woman, also causes death. Death is viewed as punishment. The religious response is to offer immortality as the antidote: either of soul, or soul and body. Immortality is the way to negate the finality of death. Immortality often requires a process of judgement, and the way we fare can depend upon the appropriate rituals and goodwill of those alive. Death is a social affair, and our ability to confront this terror can depend upon the ritualized ministrations of the living. "The antinomies of death and life, permanence and impermanence, mortality and immortality, vitality and transcendence can only be handled through the use of empowering and powerful rituals. At the very moment of physical death the power of the immortal spirit must be reasserted and this is done in a way which enhances the passivity and vulnerability, the deadness, of the dead" (Davies 1994:31).
Rosenberg holds incontrovertibly that there is no logical possibility of a person’s surviving his/her own death, for to survive after death requires a dualist view of personhood, such as was held by Aristotle in his body-and-soul duality. “The ‘souls’ which people are often said to have are merely nominal objects. They [are] the products of linguistic appearances, not things in their own right” (Rosenberg 1998:65). Souls can also be things which people are said to be. But if people “are” souls, then soul is merely being used as a synonym for person: the soul is then what dies at the moment of death (Rosenberg 1998:65). Rosenberg comes logically to the conclusion that people simply cease to exist when they die.

Another analytical philosopher, Fred Feldman, critiques the termination thesis proposed by Rosenberg, also using the logical positivist approach of the analytical philosopher. He quotes from other philosophers who have accepted what he calls the “termination thesis”, for example the ancient Greek, Epicurus, who says that “death is nothing to us” (Feldman 1992:91). If the individual does not exist after his/her death, then nothing bad can happen to the person at that time. Lucretius also: “He who exists not, cannot be miserable” (Feldman 1992:129). Put simply, this view holds that when a person dies that is the end. There can be no possibility of any other sort of posthumous existence.

But, according to Feldman, “a substantial portion of our common-sense thought about death conflicts blatantly with the termination thesis” (Feldman 1992:93). Feldman feels that one does not have to subscribe to a body/soul dualism (or to the dualism implied in the notion of the psychological person/physical person) in order to question the termination thesis. Feldman’s argument is, as is Rosenberg’s, linguistic: he says that according to those who hold to the termination thesis one must believe that at the moment of death, things simply cease to exist. Yet obviously this is not true—many things continue to exist after death, not least of which is the physical body of the person, albeit in a radically altered state. Feldman concludes: “The good news is that most of us will survive death. Most of us will continue to exist after we die. The bad news is that though we will survive death, and will continue to exist after we die, each of us will then be dead. We will have no psychological experiences. Such survival may be of very little value” (Feldman 1992:105). From an existential point of view, this conclusion is the same as Rosenberg’s.

In what then does our survival after death really consist? People “survive” after death in the lives of those left behind. Although physically absent, they remain present in the memories of those who knew them in life. The dead are endlessly present in the genetic makeup of their descendents, thus I might discover in my son the explosive temperament I knew in my grandfather, or see as I get older my elderly aunt looking out at me as I look into the mirror. The ways of doing, thinking and being of our ancestors seem to manifest themselves, whether we like it or not, in our own lives. The dead survive in a very tangible way in the material possessions they leave behind them. It can come as a shock to discover that a dead man, safely buried, still has shoes under the bed and clothes in the cupboard. Libraries and collections of all sorts become the pleasure or the burden of those to whom they are left.

The dead survive also in the memorials that are raised to them. Might they (the dead) not have preferred to have had memorials raised during life?
In Western society, as Davies points out, there is now virtually no formal, post-funeral system of mourning. The failure of liturgy is seen also in the perfunctory nature of the cremation service, and in the often complete absence of any sort of "remains". But despite all of this, and despite the fact that we live in a secular society where a minority of people actively practice any sort of religion, Davies contends that a look at the personal columns in a local newspaper will be evidence enough to see that the average person does not subscribe to the conclusions of the contemporary analytical philosopher. He argues for a popular belief in what he terms "purgatory" and claims that "purgatory is an egalitarian idea" (Davies 1994:35). In using this phrase, he is obviously giving it a personal sense. His is not the purgatory of the Roman Catholic believer – he appears to use this term for some vaguely defined location to which popular culture consigns the dead. He then analyses some typical offerings in the personal columns of a local newspaper and concludes that the idea of communion of some sort between the worlds of the living and the dead is very common, as is the notion that we can affect the lot of the dead, and that they are, although dead, approachable to intercede for us, and in so doing, they affect our lives too. The belief in the interdependence of the living and the dead is common. Most obituary notices in papers address the dead, and assert the vitality of those relationships. From a reading of these columns one can construct a populist view of death as a "benign, common and necessary sacrifice made by our ancestors so that we - who will in turn become ancestors - can live in cheerful and respectful harmony with our own being, that is to say, in a form of life with an ending which reunites us" (Davies 1994:39).

The historian, Caroline Bynum, looks at the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body after death as it has been understood across the long period of the Middle Ages in Europe. She contends that what modern readers "find most disturbing about medieval discussions is their extreme literalism and materialism" (Bynum 1990:54). She then looks at contemporary popular culture, especially films and television, and finds there a very similar insistence on corporeality, on the actual physical presence of the dead in their pre-death bodies, and concludes that modern ways of thinking are not all that far away (in this instance) from those of the medievals. She looks also at current philosophical discussions on personal identity and survival and finds the philosophical "cases" presented as hypotheses for discussion quite as bizarre as those presented by medieval theologians (Bynum 1990:58).
Current philosophical debate centres around two main models, the brain/body transplant, and "teletransportation". In the transplant model the thought process begins by locating the essence of a person's identity in the brain. Modern philosophers ponder why it is that we tend to assume that "we" survive if the body is replaced little by little in organ transplants, but have problems with the idea of the entire body being replaced at once, in a hypothetical brain/body transplant. If my brain is transplanted into the body of another person, whose identity does the resultant "person" assume?

In the "teletransportation" model a person's "body pattern" is beamed through space to materialize on another planet (Bynum 1990:59) or, as was seen on a recent David Copperfield magic show on television, in another part of this world (in that case on a beach in Hawaii). Many popular culture television series depend upon the invasion of a person's body by an alien personality, to the consternation of relatives or friends who are confounded by a changed identity in an unchanged body, or by the other variant, a sustained identity within a changed body.

Essays in popular culture like those described above all deal with the same issue that contemporary analytical philosophers wrestle with: in what does personal identity consist? A variety of answers are given to this question:

I am my continuous stream of memory,
I am my body,
I am a particular part of my body, my brain.
Do any of these components "survive" the death of the body? Medieval Christianity taught the doctrine of bodily resurrection, and a look at contemporary popular culture seems to evidence a like fascination with bodily survival.

Bynum observes that "many recent movies and TV programmes deal with identity and survival, not through stories of ghosts and para-psychic phenomena, but through fantasies of body exchange and rejuvenation" (Bynum 1990:62). The underlying assumption seems to be that in some way the body is the self - this assumption, according to Bynum, is the same one made by the medievals who debated at great length the physical mechanics of the Christian doctrine of the bodily resurrection of the dead. There does seem to be much evidence from contemporary popular culture that a largely secular society nevertheless still wants to believe that death is not the end, that there is some form of life after death, this despite the conclusions of the analytical philosophers who contend that such statements are logically inadmissible.
The Mesopotamian story of Gilgamesh, which dates from somewhere early in the second millennium B.C., tells of the discovery of mortality by Gilgamesh, a legendary king and demi-god, as he experiences the death of his friend Enkidu. Gilgamesh then undertakes a dangerous journey in order to search for a remedy capable of saving us from death. His discovery of death occurs only in his confronting the death of the other (Dastur 1998: 6,7). According to Dastur's interpretation of this story it is only in the experience of the death of the other that we can experience death. To "experience" our own death is a logical impossibility because death entails the cessation of all experience as we know it. We can anticipate our own deaths, and we can experience by proximity the death of another. "Mourning is a process of interiorising the deceased and the funeral ritual itself is simply the visible mediation of this" (Dastur 1998:8). Mourning encompasses various funeral rites in different cultures, but includes also "many other cultural practices, in particular those whose function is the formation of a collective memory" (Dastur 1998:8). Culture only becomes possible when people can assume a certain mastery over the irreversible flow of time, and this involves bringing into play a variety of techniques involved in alleviating the pain of absence. The absence par excellence is the absence of death. Mourning is an experience of the privation of the other and so "the death of the loved one is the announcement of my own death, since it condemns me to a desolation" the experience of which can be like the experience of my own death (Dastur 1998:8).

Epicurus held that when we exist death is not, and when death is we no longer are, so that for us it is nothing. Epicurus saw as the goal of human life the attainment of a calm and equilibrium untroubled by pain. Fear he saw as the worst of all pains, and the fear of death and the possible punishments and sufferings wrought by the gods on people after death as the worst of all possible fears. A rationality which excluded the possibility of gods who actively engaged with humankind, and excluded also the idea of there being any part of a person which continued after death, meant that the worst of all possible fears were precluded. Thus "the wise man could be self-reliant and at peace". Pleasure becomes for Epicurus the ultimate good, but pleasure is not hedonism: it consists in the tranquility resultant from freedom from pain (Armstrong 1965:132).

The question of death was one which much exercised the ancient Greek philosophers. Aristotelian philosophy holds that at the moment of death the soul (anima) leaves the body. Earlier in Greek philosophical writing, Socrates (as reported by Plato in the dialogue Phaedo) says that the true philosopher welcomes death, for it is not an end but a transition. It is the means by which one is transported from the realm of the seeing, of appearance, to the realm of the real, what Plato called the world of the Forms. In his final dialogue, Phaedo, he explores this theme (Rosenberg 1998:1).

Making sense of death is problematic – hence the tendency to see death as a passage, rather than an end. Thus we speak of dying as "passing away" – the word "decease" also conveys a sense of departure and separation. We talk of the living as those "left behind" while the dead "go on before". All of these metaphors embedded in the English language indicate that the populist view of death, however illogical or linguistically inadmissible it may be, is that death is not simply an end. The active voice used in the mode of speech which gives us "he lost his life" also indicates that there is a "he" who continues to exist despite the fact that he has "lost" his "life". The implication is that it is no more than an object possessed by the owner, who, despite losing it, continues to exist.
Many cultures and religions regard death as a caesura between this world and the next — the restitution of all things is to occur in the realm beyond death. This notion of eschatology is a powerful way of affirming life and thwarting death, and is found in Judaism and Christianity. "Christianity affirms no less energetically both the death and the resurrection of Christ. ... In Christianity the idea of a God triumphing over death emerges, and the tragic nature of the human condition becomes apparent in the form of death on the cross of a Christ forsaken by a God who remains silent. This is the paradox of a God who in dying becomes master over death, and who in offering himself up to death affirms life and joy" (Dastur 1998:14). own death (Dastur 1998:46).

I conclude with the words of Job, from the ancient Jewish story, who wrestles with the problems of death and suffering:

I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
I myself will see him with my own eyes — I, and not another (Job 19:25-27).

And of John Donne, 17th century English poet and cleric, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in London:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for, thou art not soe,
For, those whom thou think'st, thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poore death, nor yet canst thou kill mee:
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures bee,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee doe goe,
Rest of their bones, and soules deliverie.
Thou art slave to Fate, and chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poysone, warre, and sicknesse dwell,
And poppie, or charmes can make us sleepe as well,
And better than thy stroake: Why swel'lst thou then?
One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally,
And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die (Gardner 1957:85).

For Job, as for John Donne centuries later, religious conviction becomes existential certainty. It is in this sense that Job can say "I know" and Donne can adopt a tone of gentle mockery as he asserts that death will die.
FUNERARY ART:

A very substantial proportion of the art works and the artefacts of material culture produced in the course of world history could be called funerary art having been made either for internment within a tomb of some sort, or for adornment of a tomb, or for ritual purposes associated with burial practices.

I will deal briefly with some examples of funerary art, especially with some which make use of clay as the major material of construction.

The Aegean world/ Saul Weinberg notes that vast quantities of pottery survives from the ancient world, pottery unique both in its quantity and in the amount of literature which has been written about it. Very many and varied vessel shapes have been documented and named (Weinberg 1966:187). Weinberg argues that two categories of works particularly must have been specific funerary vessels: the first of which must be those too large to have been merely ordinary domestic vessels in that they are too large to have been purely functional. Such vessels often have sculptural adjuncts, or are painted in evanescent colours which could not have withstood everyday use and must thus have been for ritual use only. These large vessels later in Greek history became tomb markers, freestanding on graves. Often these large urns had holes in the bottom through which libations were poured. The other group are those which were too small to have been any use in the ordinary domestic context. The miniature terracotta chairs which I refer to later on in this text fall into this category.

Great numbers of terracotta statuettes have been found in Greek tombs dating from the archaic period (6th century BC) and continuing into the early Christian era. Similar figures have also been found in Greek houses and temples. They include figures of gods and goddesses, athletes, soldiers, animals, women doing household chores, dolls and toy animals as well as what look like character figures, and grotesques. Miss C. A. Hutton, an archaeologist working a hundred years ago on collections of terracottas at the British Museum, pondered the meaning of these figures and concluded from readings of ancient Greek documents that these are tributes or offerings placed in tombs by friends and family of the dead, perhaps similar in intent to the placing of flowers within a grave today (Hutton 1899:1-13). Such terracotta figures, it is argued, had three recommendations: they were cheap, and so within the reach of all, they offered no temptation to grave robbers, and they were "pretty and pleasant to look at and live with, but had no meaning until the purchaser had decided on their destination" (Hutton 1899:13).

Later scholars have further researched these terracotta figures, for example those found in vast numbers at the ancient site of Tanagra in central Greece. Between 600 BC and 500 AD it was a prosperous city. Extensive burial grounds grew up all around the city on roads leading out. Wholesale robbery in the 1870s of these cemeteries flooded the Victorian market for Greek antiquities with the contents of nearly 10 000 graves. Such figurines were very popular with the Victorians (Higgins 1986:21-31). One wonders why Hutton - writing in 1899 - felt that such figures were no temptation to grave robbers: perhaps she was unaware of the looting of such tombs a decade or so before the writing of her book. Reynold Higgins describes and documents these figures and their history. He also says that figures similar to those found in graves were likely to have been found in private houses and temples. Because they were found in such abundance at Tanagra these figurines have been termed "tanagras".
Across the sea on the island of Crete enormous pithoi or storage vessels made by the ancient Cretans and found in the course of archaeological excavations on the island are most note-worthy for size. Such ceramic vessels were used for storage of grain and oil, and also for internment. The largest are as tall as a person. Platon describes larnakes, or chest sarcophagi, and pithoi, or sepulchral jars. Both were made of clay, the larnakes being modeled on contemporary wooden chests. Both were used for internment of bodies within tombs (Platon 1966:104). These vaulted structures are some of the oldest constructed tombs in Europe and are the predecessors of the Mycenaean tombs (Platon 1966:142).
China./Grave goods, often ceramic, are found in Chinese burials from Neolithic times. The nature of these burials changes across the centuries, indicating that Chinese conceptions of eternity changed in emphasis. The most spectacular of these burial goods are the terracotta soldiers, a life-sized army of soldiers made out of terracotta which accompanied the burial of the first Emperor of Qin, Lintong, Shaanxi which has been dated at 221–207 BC.

How did the Chinese view eternity? D. N. Keightley contrasts the ancient Greek view of the world, a world where objects are described in detail in their particularity, with the Chinese view where generality is stressed. According to him, even the terracotta soldiers, for all their individuality of expression, seem to be grouped in categories or types, rather than being portraits of individuals. In Chinese texts, he argues, the specific detail is associated with ritual, rather than with individuality of person or object. "We will find in those texts a passionate attention to dimension, quality, placement, orientation, sequential order, hierarchy, timing and correct attitude ... a passionate concern with precisely ordered ritual acts" (Keightley 1991:14). Elaborate funeral rites are a means of assuaging grief, but also a means of assuring status for the living, and for the dead, and through the dead (the ancestors) for the living.

Ritual detail in a mortuary context can be seen in China in Neolithic times from the 3rd millennium BC. Grave goods were placed in graves with a great deal of care. Distinctions were made between vessels placed near to the corpse (those which had presumably belonged to the deceased in life) and those placed at a greater distance. Mortuary ritual can also be deduced from the practice of secondary burial as early as the 5th millennium BC. These secondary burials appear to have been collective – perhaps affirming Keightley's contention that notions of eternity in Chinese thought and history involve generalisation, rather than specific individual immortality.

Mortuary jades in early Chinese burials often occur in conjunction with ceramic vessels. Jade is a beautiful, extremely hard, stone – in itself a metaphor for eternity. It is very difficult to work, requiring patience. Jade ritual axes, showing no signs of having been used, were included in burials, as were large numbers of jade "bi" (disks) and "cong" (tubes). These objects have been found only in burials, suggesting that they were specifically religious mortuary objects. "This strongly suggests that the most demanding, as well as the most enduring, of all Neolithic objects to manufacture were made for the dead" (Keightley 1991:15). Pots made for daily use were also buried, suggesting that post-mortem existence was conceived of as being a continuation in some way of pre-mortem existence. "The jade discs and tubes, by contrast, were not apparently used in daily life. They served to mark the very different conditions and expectations of the ritually dead" (Keightley 1991:15).
In one particular tomb a young man was buried some 4,500 years ago. 10 jade bi were laid on the ground together with three axes, these were then burnt in a fairly intense conflagration. The corpse was placed on top of these jades and surrounded by large numbers of jade cong. Ceramic vessels were placed at his head and feet. More jades were laid on top of the deceased, over his chest and abdomen. Perhaps these vast numbers of jade objects assured some form of immortality, or served as metaphors for eternity. The shapes of the stones and the nature of the material itself suggest such metaphorical connotations.

The use of bronze casting in the 2nd millennium BC in China meant that, from then on, large numbers of bronzes, often with inscriptions, accompanied burials. Such inscriptions personalize the tombs and carry specific messages. The inscriptions relate to the family and to the ancestors: one’s highest duty as a Chinese person was to be seen to become oneself an ancestor. Conceptions of eternity thus relate to the family or lineage, rather than to the individual. Death was seen as a mode of continuity between the generations. The ritual objects buried in tombs came to include a variety of lifelike statues of persons and animals: perhaps there was some optimistic hope of the continuance of life as we know it after death. The most spectacular of such burials are those of rulers which include a variety of terracotta armies, some life-sized, and some smaller.
West Africa/Because I have looked to West African models in learning techniques for making large pots the study of the West African model of ritual ceramics is of particular significance to this study. To some extent these are traditions which in rural communities still continue today, unlike those in the other cultures referred to in the preceding paragraphs. It is not always possible to make a clear distinction between pots intended for ritual use and those for everyday use: the boundaries are constantly crossed. "Pots enter largely into that exchange of meanings that constitutes everyday social life and defines relationships and events. ... Pots often pass from everyday to 'ritual' contexts and back again suggesting that the distinction is merely one of convenience for the outside observer rather than one of substance for the users themselves" (Barley 1994: 116). A person may buy in a market two identical pots, one for domestic use, and one for use in his ancestral shrine. A pot which is in everyday use as a water pot may, upon the death of its owner, be "dressed like a human being and [have] fermenting beer poured into it. The bubbling of the beer is regarded as indicating the presence of her spirit" (Barley 1994: 88-9). Such a pot then becomes a ritual object. The distinction between the ritual and the everyday is not necessarily a clean-cut thing. In Western Europe a bone china vessel from Spode, kept for special use in the ceremony of taking tea, may find itself, having been chipped, being used to feed the cat (Barley 1994:73).

Black pottery vessels with lids called 'family pots' were made by the Asante in Ghana. The pots were decorated with sculptural images of birds, heads, spiders, ladders and walking sticks. Rattray describes their use in funerals of important people:

This pot generally has a lid or cover which has been fashioned to represent the dead. ... All the blood relations of the dead now shave their heads: this hair is placed in the pot. About sundown some of the women of the clan take the whole of the utensils from the sora hut [a rough temporary hut on the outskirts of the town] the food and the "family pot" containing the hair ... and proceed, being very careful not to look behind them, to the "thicket of ghosts" i.e. the burial ground where all these articles are deposited, not on the grave, but in a part of the cemetery known as asensie "the place of the pots". Here the mortar is set down, the cooking stones are set in position, the cooking pot is placed upon them ... and the "family pot" set down beside them McLeod states that "nowadays they may well not be abandoned at cemeteries but kept for safety in a special room with the stools of the dead" (Barley 1994:110).

This reference to contemporary practice has particular relevance to this study because I have made a chair to accompany the pot for each person represented in this exhibition.
The earliest known terracotta sculptures in sub-Saharan Africa come from the Nok culture in Nigeria and date from as early as 900 BC. The pieces were first documented by Western anthropologists after their discovery in 1943 in the course of tin-mining in the Jos Plateau area. Since then large numbers of Nok works have been recovered. They are thus named for the town of Nok which is the nearest one to the site of the original discovery. The fact that the works are complex and sophisticated leads to the belief that they may well have had an, as yet unrecovered, antecedent. Nok pieces with common characteristics have been found over a wide area. The largest are almost life-sized figures in terracotta. The works are characterised by a richly grogged and burnished terracotta surface, and by the piercing of eyes, nostrils and ears. Several animals are represented in the sculpture – elephants, monkeys, snakes and insects. Human beings tend to be less naturalistically depicted than animals are. Most of the works date between 500 BC and 200 AD, although some are as early as 900 BC. Ekpo Eyo describes his excavation in 1969 of a site known as Lafogido. "According to oral tradition, Lafogico was a former king of Ife, and belonged to one of four ruling families. His compound was about two hundred yards from the present Palace. I ... excavated a mythical animal [which] had a royal emblem on it and was placed on top of a globular pot that was inset into the edges of a rectangular potter pavement. Underneath the pavement were the outlines of what could possibly be a burial site" (Eyo & Wijllett 1982:13). Ekpo Eyo describes how the Oni refused permission for the site to be thoroughly excavated in order not to anger the ancestors whose burial site it was. These vessels exemplify the contention that the boundaries between sacred vessel making (that is, the making of vessels set aside for specific purposes which could be termed religious) and the making of ordinary vessels for domestic use are easily transgressed: the large-bellied form of the Nok burial vessel is similar to that of the water vessel seen in many areas of Africa. The techniques for building such a pot would be the same.

The anthropologist, Marla Berns, has documented the making of pots for ritual use in North-East Nigeria within the context of a number of different groupings of people in this area (Berns 1989, 1990). She describes, for example, the Yungur from North-East Nigeria who make anthropomorphic vessels called wiiso to contain ancestral spirits. Chiefs are buried within ceramic vessels, and are then given a secondary burial within a year of the original internment when their skulls are removed and buried within the wiiso vessel. Because a great deal of variation occurs within the genre, Berns argues that these pots are individual ceramic portraits linked to specific people. The spirit pots of the chiefs are large – 95 centimetres high - but much smaller spirit pots – about 10 centimetres - are built for use by ordinary people. For the Yungur "the reality of their ancestors is inseparable from the reality of the spirit vessels in which they dwell and with which they become inextricably linked. The meanings wiiso carry are tied to their active role in constructing and maintaining the world in which the Yungur live" (Berns 1990:50). The areas where the wiiso are situated are shrines and in these areas contact with the spirits is made. "Producing the wiiso can be read as acts of creation echoing the work of Leura, the Yungur god of creation who 'makes' people ... The nexus of these related activities resides with women, who as producers of wiiso facilitate the transformation of the dead into spirits and back again into people and who as mothers physically perpetuate and increase lineages" (Berns 1990:53). Nicholas David, Judith Sterner & Kodzo Gavua propose that "pots share with persons the characteristic of owing their existence to having been irreversibly transformed, by fire and by enculturation, respectively" (David et al 1988:366).
Although obviously not ceramic, the designer coffins originally made in Ghana by the Ga carpenter and coffin-maker Kane Kwei in Accra are an interesting example of contemporary funerary art. What began as individualised painted wooden coffins which were designed to give visual evidence of the status or occupation of the deceased are now regarded internationally, because of the intervention of Western dealers and curators, as art works and have been exhibited in America and Europe and in South Africa. The brightly coloured coffins can be made to order: a very popular design is the Mercedes Benz, with its connotations of wealth and status. The mother of a large family often chooses a mother hen with chickens, the doctor a syringe, and the shoe-maker a giant very shiny shoe. In terms of design and concept these gaily coloured idiosyncratic works are a long way away from the very sombre rectangular box favoured in the West (Hackett 1996:189 and Burns 1974:25).

**South Africa**/Excavations carried out in 1994 in Cobern Street, Cape Town, by the Archaeology Department of the University of Cape Town uncovered, among numerous other graves, a Khoi burial where a ceramic pot which had obviously been used as a cooking vessel was discovered at the base of the burial shaft. Also accompanying the skeletal remains of the person buried there in a seated position were the shells of numerous shellfish, a tortoise shell box, buttons and bone decorations. Grind stones marked the grave.

The discovery of a ceramic pot within the burial is atypical for Khoi burials.


Funerary art can be found all over the world in all cultures. With the exception of the contemporary Ghanaian coffins the ones I have chosen for discussion have been selected because ceramic has been used as a significant material in making objects for rituals surrounding death and internment.
ARTISTS WHOSE WORK HAS INFLUENCED ME:

I have chosen to describe the work of three contemporary British sculptors as having influenced my own art making. When I began work on this project I confronted the problem of how to use a visual medium to speak of the transcendent. I looked for artists whose work appeared to me to engage with these issues. The artists who I discuss below were those whose work resonated with that which I wanted to find within my own work.

Anthony Gormley/Gormley is a British sculptor who works principally in making casts in plaster from his own body which he renders in lead. These casts deal with the interior view, the space which the body occupies, and the relationship of the body to the world. They are essentially containers, containers for the space which the body occupies.

Gormley spent some years of his life (before training as a sculptor) in India in the study of Yoga, and much of the metaphysic of that discipline informs his work. Yoga makes much of the idea of breathing within the body, and of the body as containing breath, of there being a sense of space within the body. This notion is both physical and metaphysical, and it is that combination of the material and the spiritual which I find most pertinent to my own work.

Gormley articulates his position as an artist in a 1996 interview with E.H.Gombrich:

What I am doing is realising, materialising, perhaps for the first time, the space within the body ... it is to do with meditation ... to materialise the sensation of that inner space within the body. ... It is an attempt to realise embodiment without worrying too much about mimesis (Hutchinson 1996:10).

That for me is the real challenge of sculpture. How do you make material, an object among other objects, somehow carry the feeling of being - for the viewer somehow to make connection with it. The idea that there can be things that cannot be articulated which can be conveyed in a material way (Hutchinson 1996:12).

I am interested in something that one could call the collective subjective. I really like the idea that if something is intensely felt by one individual that intensity can be felt even if the precise cause is not recognized. I think it has to do with the equation that I am trying to make between an individual highly personal experience and this very objective thing, a thing in the world, amongst other things (Hutchinson 1996:18).

Gormley speaks of his works as an attempt to “materialize uncertainty” and “to isolate some point of contact between consciousness and matter” (Hutchinson 1996:61). Characteristic of his work is a pervasive sense of composure and self-awareness, a contemplative stillness, like that of deep concentration or meditation.

He cites as an influence on his work the writings of the 3rd century Christian, St Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa who writes in his autobiography which he calls The Confessions of the ideas of memory and forgetting, and of the ways in which the world can be contained, and forgotten, within the self.
Gormley says that his "work is to make bodies into vessels that both contain and occupy space" (Hutchinson 1996:118). He says that he is most interested in the space that the body occupies. What space do you occupy if you close your eyes? Closing the eyes can heighten that sense of your personal space as a tangible entity. Where is the space that the dead occupy? In the months immediately following the death of my husband I had a very strong feeling that there was a space as a distinct area which was now vacant where he had been. This space was a very real place with specific dimensions, although not visible. I feel that the works which I have made are an attempt to give a visual equivalent to that space which each person either dead or alive occupies.

Gormley claims of his own work that it "comes from the same source as the need for religion: wanting to face existence and discover meaning" (Hutchinson 1996:120). I have felt a similar imperative in terms of my own art making.

I conclude with Gormley's views on death as seen in his work:

I see all 'things' as earth above-ground. We are the most vertical animal. We have been made conscious by space and are full of space. Space exists within us as imagination, thought and sensation, and outside of us in terms of distance. Death is a doorway. For me it is the affirmation of the mystery of life and connects in some way with our nature as space. I see space in light and in darkness: one has to do with the imagination and the other with thought (Hutchinson 1996:120).

These musings seem pertinent to this research in that the realationship of the living to death (their own and that of others) is one of the issues which I have sought to comes to terms with in producing this body of work.
Andy Goldsworthy is a second British sculptor whose work I find most beautiful. He is an artist who uses natural materials only, usually in a natural setting (although he has worked within a gallery context) but always transformed in a very human way. He often uses geometric shapes, circles, spheres, and cones. His work has a powerful feeling of having being touched by hand, and yet also being completely of nature. He works in very fragile ephemeral materials, using leaves, thorns, flowers, and rain shadows, but also in hard and permanent materials, using stone and the ancient techniques of dry-stone walling to create walls and cairns.

Throughout my life I have collected natural materials, stones, seeds, shells, twigs, and have taken pleasure in such collections. I have collected them for their aesthetic qualities: for shape, colour, texture, and the joy of the material. I have particularly liked collections where similar forms reinforce one another. The discovery of a sculptor who used nothing but such objects in creating his works was liberating for me. Goldsworthy did not, as Henry Moore had done, and many others also, use natural form as a stimulus for creating his own formal entities. He used natural form for itself. And yet in doing so he transformed it in a remarkable way into something which spoke of values other than the purely biological.

My use of natural form in the works on this exhibition relates to this discovery. I have not used them in the way that Goldsworthy has done, but I have used them to inform the meanings inherent in the pieces of which they form a part.

Goldsworthy says of his own work that the relationship of people with the natural world is central to his concerns as an artist. He professes himself to be very concerned with how people work the land and how they relate to it (Goldsworthy & Friedman 1990:11). Although his work makes reference to ancient crafts, like weaving and wall building, he stresses that he has tried to avoid too close a similarity to these crafts in his work. He has also, he says, had to avoid becoming too decorative, especially in the flower pieces (Goldsworthy & Friedman 1990:19). Energy is an important concept in his work, and in his holes in the earth he seeks to exploit the energy contained in the earth. Because light does not always fall into them, they can appear limitless or infinite (Goldsworthy & Friedman 1990:24).

He says that his work is about "the act of touching and the way the landscape changes" (Goldsworthy & Friedman 1990:164).
Anish Kapoor was born in Bombay, India, in 1954, but he has since the 1970s lived and worked in Britain. Kapoor's work is powerful and interesting because he uses material not merely as a substance from which he can construct objects which carry his intended meaning, but to denote the immaterial, he evokes spirit by using matter. Kapoor says of his own work: "I do not want to make sculpture about form - it doesn't really interest me. I wish to make sculpture about belief, or about passion, about experience that is outside of material concern" (Celant 1998:xx).

Minimalist sculpture, for example work by Donald Judd, presents works which are made in steel: the surfaces are hard and the forms are rigid. Kapoor's work is the opposite - the surfaces are permeable and unstable (especially the pigment works) and porous. They speak of contingency and ephemeral. Combinations of opposites continue to be at the heart of Kapoor's work - high and low, mortal and immortal, perishable (powder) and permanent (stone). To quote Kapoor again: "Binary oppositions are the fundamental elements of the human condition. Capturing the void in matter is one way of creating drama, of placing the scene in a physically and psychologically clear language, in the sense that every form is either concave or convex. The materials used in Indian art can be perishable, such as bread, rice, and clay, or durable, such as stone and precious metals" (Celant 1998:xxiv).

The duality of the inside and the outside, of spirit and matter, is contained within his work. The entering into stone, the creating of significant cavities within this very hard material, speak of this duality. In works called Madonna (1989 - 90) and Angel (1990) he explores the spirit in matter - the deep blue voids and solids are at once material and spiritual. Void field (1989) is an attempt to create a place in which the distinctions between mass and void, one and many, heaven and earth, cease to exist. The healing of St Thomas (1989 - 90) shows an opening or wound of red pigment set at eye level into the wall. Belief (for St Thomas) comes at the touch of a hand - the physical asserts the spiritual.

Kapoor speaks about pottery: "Let's think of the first person who made a pot. I feel that it was almost certainly a woman. Let us say that she went to the riverside and found a lump of clay and was able, with a few subtle movements of her hands, to transform it into a pot. What has happened is that the clay has completely changed. It is now a pot. It has a new function, a new purpose, and what is most important - a new name. The ability to give a new name is, in a way, this act of transformation" (Celant 1998:12). Works by Kapoor called The pot is a god (1985) and Pot for her (1985) explore sexual iconography, the feminine, visceral sensuality, the darkness and the void as the point of creation. In Eyes turn inward (1993) two large darkish red pots are placed on the walls of a room facing one another: two deep voids.

Kapoor engages in a significant way with issues that are important to me without at all being didactic, prescriptive, or literal. One of the issues which engaged me when making my own work was the search for ways to deal in matter with the realm of spirit. Kapoor's work seems to do this in a deep but seemingly effortless way, without tortuous recourse to obvious iconography or to literary sources. I don't think that my own work is like his at all, but I would like to feel that there is in some measure at least a similarity of intent.
THE MATERIAL I HAVE USED IS CLAY

What is clay? Clay is a naturally occurring fine-grained material which consists of one or more clay mineral types together with lesser amounts of other minerals such as mica, feldspar, quartz, and iron oxide. When mixed with the right amount of water, clay becomes so plastic and malleable that it can be easily formed into whatever shape the potter desires. When fired to temperatures in excess of 600 degrees C, it is transformed into a dense hard material that can survive for thousands of years.

Clay minerals originate from the alteration, during weathering, of the feldspar minerals contained in igneous rocks such as granite and basalt. These clay minerals consist of tiny flakes of aluminium silicate. Water is an essential constituent of clay and represents some 40% by weight of workable clay. A thin film of so-called “bound water” coats the surface of each clay flake and is only removed by temperatures in excess of 600 degrees C. The bulk of the water in clay is pore water which occupies the spaces between the clay particles. This water is lost continuously by evaporation as the clay dries, but is only completely driven off when firing begins and temperatures reach around 120 degrees C. It is this pore water that provides lubrication and allows the clay flakes to slide over each other, thereby making the clay workable.

The principal clay mineral types or species are: kaolin, bentonite (or smectite) and illite. Each has a different chemical composition and structure, which affect its characteristics as potter’s clay. The other associated minerals such as mica, feldspar and quartz affect the workability of the clay and the nature of the fired ceramic product. The iron oxides which typically give the red colour to earthenware clays strongly affect the colour of the final fired clay. The temperature to which the clay is fired also affects the colour of the finished work.

Potters typically classify clays as earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain clays. Earthenware is rich in iron oxide and thus fires red in colour, the colour deepening as the final firing temperature is increased. Fired earthenware is porous. Stoneware is whiter and vitrifies more thoroughly when fired than earthenware clays do. It is thus harder, denser, and less porous than earthenware. Porcelain is the whitest, purest, and least plastic of clays. If very thinly formed and fired to a very high temperature it can be translucent.

For the art maker, clay presents as an exceedingly malleable material, which denotes both permanence and transience. Fragility and resilience co-exist in dialectical alterity. Each of these oppositions speak of the nature of human life, and clay is thus a material which I find very attractive to use.

Clay is a material rich in associative qualities. As exponent of these properties of clay I quote from Olu Oguibe:

As earth, clay also embodies a strong element of spirituality in its constitution and source. Though inorganic, it nevertheless connects powerfully to the soil and the land with their regenerative connotations and symbolism. ... The earth is central to all human existence, as both source and repository, as the ultimate signifier of the cyclicity of life. As the abode of the spirits and the souls of the ancestors, it is sacred (Oguibe 1998:49).
I quote also from Nigel Barley:

> Potting involves a number of changes. It takes formless matter and shapes it. It transforms, through the operation of heat, from wet to dry, soft to hard, natural to cultural, impure to pure. Pots are above all vessels and so may be used to refer to the body cavities – heads, wombs, bellies, rectums. They lend themselves readily to discussions of spirit, conception, essences and the like (Barley 1994:85).

It can be seen from a consideration of these two quotations that clay as material is powerfully evocative and lends itself readily to the construction of the sort of meaning which I have attempted to deal with in my work. In putting together the elements of this exhibition, and in arranging them in relation to one another, I have attempted to make a statement about my notions of the nature of human life – that it is infinitely fragile, that the time which we have here is transitory and finite, and that all of our relationships are bounded by a beginning and an end. I have tried to make objects which speak of my attempt to embrace the necessity of holding contradictory notions in a tenuous and sometimes painful balance as a way of progressing on this journey.

The following paragraph occurred in the introduction to a catalogue accompanying a 1996 exhibition of the sculpture of Tony Cragg, and was printed in ArtForum December 1998:11. It describes the relationship of the sculptor to the material he or she uses:

> Sculpture, of all the objects and things that human beings deem necessary to make their lives more livable, belongs for several reasons in a rare and extraordinary class of its own. Rare, because even just looked at quantitatively, very few kilograms of sculpture are made on an average day, while many billions of tons of material are made in other more "useful" things. Extraordinary, because although sculpture remains for the greater part useless, unless designed objects, it is an attempt to make dumb material express human thoughts and emotions. It is the attempt not just to project intelligence into material but also to use material to think with (Cragg 1996).

Germano Celant deals with similar issues in relation to the work of Anish Kapoor. He says that "the artist has a central place in the history of culture because he has the power to give new form to matter, endowing it with new character" (1998: xi). He says that the activity of art making consists in the "transformation of life into new images, the granting of force and energy to forms and material". The artist uses material to construct meaning within a space. This space is then "existential and metaphysical, individual and mystical" (1998: xiv).
There are numerous creation myths where clay is the substance used by the gods/god in creating people. I cite Middle Eastern, African, and native American examples. Perhaps the most ancient recorded story tells of the Sumerian goddess of the primeval sea who is tired of having to work for her daily food. The gods then fashion, at a drunken banquet, numerous people from clay whose purpose will be to serve them. The first results are imperfect, but eventually complete people are formed (Freund 1964: 93). A similar story comes from Babylonia. In Egypt, the father of the gods, Khemu, moulded people on the potter’s wheel (Freund 1964: 94). Prometheus, the Greek god, fashions men, women and beasts from clay. A Greek story tells how gods shaped men and women underground of fire and earth (Freund 1964: 94). The Hebrew God, in order to end his isolation, makes Adam of clay: “Adam” comes from the Hebrew word “adamah” meaning earth (Genesis 2:7). Numerous African stories tell of people being formed from clay. For example, the Yoruba believe that they were fashioned from clay by the sky-god, Obatala (Freund 1964:96). For the Fang, Mbere, the creator, took clay and formed it into a lizard. Mbere put his lizard into a bowl of sea water. On the eighth day Mbere looked at his work – the lizard came out, and it was a man (Freund 1964: 96). Many African and native American stories tell of this creation taking place with animal helpers. Frequently these myths require both the fashioning from clay and the breath of the god which imparts life: the god’s spirit or breath is essential to make humankind vital.2

At the other end of the process we have the words of the Anglican Prayer Book in the Burial service where humankind is referred to as being from “dust unto dust”. It is thus possible to regard in a metaphorical sense, the earth, (and specifically that particularly malleable substance, clay) as that from which we proceed and the matrix to which we return. Myth-makers and their audiences may well have seen this as more than symbolically true.

2See also Barley 1994: 47 - 59
WORKING WITH CLAY:

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The clay pieces that I have made fall loosely into three categories: pots, chairs, and a variety of smaller objects.

POTS/When I set out to make really large urns I had no experience in making large pots. I thus looked to potting in rural areas in Africa, specifically West Africa, to provide models for this exercise. I have been able to conduct this research by means of reading only; ideally such research should have been conducted in person on-site.

The speed and ease with which African potters can build really large pots - many in a single day's work - is quite unlike the generally slow and deliberate indoor work produced by potters working in studios in the Western world. Obviously experience is a big factor - such a potter would specialise in a particular size and style of pot made for a specific purpose and over the course of a working life would produce hundreds of examples of the same thing. Such a degree of familiarity lends a very evident confidence to the shape and structure of the pot produced. The pot becomes a beautiful thing because of the familiarity of the potter with its shape and function. The form and the purpose are integrally one. The simple rounded shapes which the pots assume have a strong sculptural quality, particularly when they are seen stacked together for firing, or for sale, or for transport to markets, or simply standing outside the house of their owner or maker.

The main building method is coiling with locally produced clay to which is added grit, or ground up potsherds, or dried organic material, or combinations of all three in order to open up the clay and increase its resistance to the thermal shock which is experienced during the firing process. Coils are produced between the hands and are directly added to the pot in progress. Some pots begin as large thick sheets of clay which are beaten over the upturned mould of an older discarded pot. Because the clay is stiff, and the sun is hot, this base rapidly firms and is taken off the mould, turned right way up, and finished with thick coils. Once it has dried to the leatherhard stage it is scraped with a tool (a broken potsherd, a piece of calabash, a curved metal rib) until it much becomes much thinner - sometimes very large pots are produced by this method having a thickness of only half of a centimetre. Sometimes the rough clay is placed as a lump into an open bowl of fired clay and then pounded into the form of the rounded base of a pot which is then completed by coiling. Depending on local traditions these pots are decorated, or not, sometimes being painted with slips (finely sieved clay in a contrasting colour) or sometimes having sculptural decoration added to them. Patterns may be combed into the wet surface of the pots, or added with pieces of soft clay.

I have experimented with variations of these procedures, some with more success than others. I built and fired for use a large shallow bowl in which to mould bases for pots, and also a large "hump" which I thought would approximate the discarded pot over which a thick blanket of clay can be draped and paddled into shape. Some of the pots on this exhibition began their lives in this way. I found working thus very difficult - I don't think that my clay approximated closely enough the heavily grogged clay used by African potters for working in this way, and as it was not possible for me to work outside in the hot sun the clay dried too slowly. I found invariably that I was taking it off the hump too soon, in which case it did not hold its shape, or that I was taking it off too late, by which stage it had already cracked as it contracted across a convex surface.
I also tried digging my own clay and using it in conjunction with processed clay from potters' suppliers. This is an area where I would like to conduct more research. The clay which was dug from the area where my studio is in Claremont became evident in construction work close to my studio when trenches were dug for pipes to be laid. The most amazingly coloured clay appeared – yellows, ochres, reds, pinks, and whites. This clay derives from deeply weathered 600 million year old Cape granite that underlies Table Mountain. It was very sandy, and should really have been washed before use. I was however reluctant to do so as I wished to try to preserve the tonality which I could see in the unfired clay. Washing would have resulted in a more uniform blended colour. I tried using the clay as it was, and found that it was too crumbly to coil easily, and that it shattered very readily once fired. I then blended some of it with a commercial white stoneware clay and found that it produced a much better coil. I also added bentonite, a very plastic form of powdered clay in small quantities to increase its plasticity. Used in this way the clay combined well with other clays in the pots where I used more than one type of clay. However the iron oxide content of the clay meant that when fired the colour tended to a more uniform red moderated by the amount of white stoneware that I had added and much of the variety and subtlety of the colouration of the unfired clay was lost.

In reading about West African potting, I found the assured simple shapes which these potters achieved through the effortlessness of long practice something which I wished to emulate in my own work. I also enjoyed very much the richness of surface texture found in these works created by working with the earth material itself. I have tried to make sculptural forms which draw upon these ancient traditions of working with clay.

**BOWLS**/The forms that I have made, whether bowls, urns or chairs, are all at least nominally functional forms. The bowl form is a very ancient form, the bowl made of fired clay being perhaps one of the first domestic artefacts made by people. It must thus be one of the primary formal shapes, and it seems to me to be the most intensely satisfying of forms, both visually and metaphorically. It speaks of containment, and in it form and function are closely integrated.

The bowl can also be domestic and intimate, and as such is a carrier of domestic and intimate meanings, it speaks of food, of cooking, of nurture, of the home, and of the small intimacies of daily life. The curved shape which has no end speaks of security and comfort, although there is always the vulnerability of the fragile edge.

**CHAIRS**/I came to the idea of making chairs to accompany the urns which were the major pieces that I was creating for exhibition during the course of my reading on the art of Africa. I was reading about shrines built to the ancestors in Cote d'Ivoire and came across a photograph of what was termed an ancestral shrine for a noble family (Vogel 1997:203). The image showed a room in a house, in warm earthy colours. On the floor were a group of pots made of clay in which were left food and water offerings for the ancestors and surrounding these objects were a ring of empty chairs, the chairs for the ancestors of that particular family, one chair for each ancestor. The chairs were various, and wooden, and spoke, I thought, in that photographic image at any rate, in that construct perhaps in the mind of the photographer, of the very tangible nature of absence, of the way in which presence is mediated in absence, of the spaces occupied by the dead. I felt then that I would like to explore the making of ceramic chairs, and that I would like to make one chair to complement each of the urns which I had made.
Ceramic is not an obvious choice of material for furniture making as it is very brittle and lacking in any degree of tensile strength. The moving about which is imperative in the using of furniture is not a quality which clay lends itself to easily. Creating thin legs upon which chairs can stand is also not easily done in clay. The shape which best withstands the thermal shock of the intense heat necessary in firing is the bowl where the stresses move around and are contained within the shape itself. A chair is generally a platform elevated on thin legs: this structure is antithetical to the nature of clay.

I thus began to look for models of furniture which I thought could be accommodated within the constraints of the medium which I wished to use. The furniture to which I have made reference came eventually to be found within the traditions of Cycladic art, of the art of the Aegean world, especially Crete and the early Aegean cultures, and especially within a variety of traditions of furniture making found in a variety of cultures in Africa.

Africa/Chairs from all over Africa, as in most other parts of the world, have been made largely from wood. Many are richly decorated, many are figurative, although some are beautifully simple intensely functional forms. Some are for domestic use, others have ceremonial or ritual functions. "The ceremonial and ritual functions also find expression in their elaborate design. Their figurative representations, skillful decoration and magical accessories have an entirely symbolic significance: they stand for powers and ideals to which the society owes its sense of cohesion" (Bocola 1996:15). As such these ceremonial seats play a similar role in African society to the thrones of kings and ecclesiastics in the Western world. but, according to Bocola, thrones and the like in the Western world are merely furniture, whereas their African counterparts may always be understood as works of sculpture. Bocola believes that this feeling of power which he sees in African furniture derives in part from the fact that most African seats are monoxylous, that is, they are carved from a single piece of wood. In addition to this the African carver often increases "the magic power of his objects" (Bocola 1996:17) by adding to them elements which in themselves either actually or symbolically are strongly suggestive of powerful forces, for example, teeth, hair, feathers, glass beads, pieces of mirror and metal and nails, or by "rubbing oil, rust, paint, blood, or other substances" into the work (Bocola 1996:18). "The African seats testify, without exception, to an all-embracing image of the self and the world, to a direct sensual relationship with both the natural and the man-made environment that has long been lost to our culture" (Bocola 1996:19).

A striking difference between African chairs and those of the Western world is that of height. The average African chair is between 8 and 30 centimeters off the ground, whereas the average Western chair is between 48 and 50 centimeters high. The usual seated position in Africa is squatting, "thereby evoking a way of life that had its natural resting and working place on the ground" (Bocola 1996:19). Interesting also is the absence of tables, the use of which necessitates the use of a comparatively high chair.

Wooden African seats are made entirely by hand, individually, thus ensuring that no two seats are ever completely identical. Each chair thus has a subtle individual character. Often such chairs will be used over a long period of time by a single person, much use giving to the piece a silky sheen or rich surface patina. The industrialised factory piece is however replacing this tradition of hand work in most parts of Africa today, and handmade furniture is no longer produced on a large scale.
In many parts of Africa stools and chairs have not only important political significance, but also psychological and religious connotations. For example, among the Asante in Ghana, a stool was the absolute personal possession of its owner and was regarded as the seat of his soul. For this reason the owner, when not using his stool, would always lay it on its side so that no-one — neither man nor spirit — might use it and thus pollute it. This belief in the animation of the seat went so far that, after a King's death, his principal stool would be kept in a royal ancestral shrine and ritually honoured (Bocala 1996:28).

Thus what might be regarded as ordinary utilitarian objects attain levels of meaning far removed from the mere utilitarian.

In many ways therefore this tradition of furniture making seemed to me to be a good model for what I intended doing. The chairs that I have made also serve a purpose more than utilitarian, I too, would like to think that these pieces of furniture accrue to themselves levels of meaning which are independent of their function. The chairs that I have made are in fact chairs that cannot really be sat upon. They are too fragile to bear the weight of a person. I have underlined this point by placing objects upon some of the chairs which render their being used as seats impossible. Their meaning must therefore reside in areas other than the functional. In accompanying the urns the chairs deal with the same areas of meaning represented by the urns.
The Cyclades/Early Cycladic furniture also served as a model for my own experiments in furniture making. This type of furniture is known today chiefly from the evidence of marble figures in which furniture is represented. Knowledge of this early Bronze Age culture in the 3rd millennium BC derives largely from excavations. Wooden furniture from the dwellings of these people no longer exists, but many male and female figures carved in marble or limestone, and seated on chairs or stools have been found (Marangou 1990; Richter 1966).

Such chairs compromised a flat seat on four rounded legs, sometimes with a bowed strut from seat to foot, and a rounded or arched back. All the structural members are rounded and thus suitable for construction in clay by means of coiling. The designs are simple but elegant and functional solutions to the requirements of the piece of furniture.

The Aegean/Terracotta furniture from the Aegean world was also a source for my own work. Best known in this genre are the terracotta sarcophagi from the ancient Greek world. Some were chest shaped, and built to echo the shape of wooden chests with lids and handles, and others were bath shaped, with ornamented lids. Often these coffins look as though they had been constructed in very wet clay the surface of which had been smoothed by hand. The touch of the hand is evident (Richter 1966 pg's 5-13)

Most interesting to me were pieces of miniature terracotta furniture, couches and chairs, often with figures on them I have loosely based two of my chairs on these works. Such miniature furniture was found accompanying burials as part of the burial goods interred with the body. Richter describes these miniatures in a chapter on Aegean furniture from Myceae and Minoa (Richter 1966: 1-12) but gives no indication of their function. However, their similarity to those terracotta miniatures from Tanagra dating from the archaic period described by Higgins, would lead me to conclude that the miniatures which I have illustrated in this text are indeed grave goods similar to those described by Hutton about 100 years ago in 1899 and by Higgins in 1986.
Objects of material culture as art/The art and craft debate which was an issue in Western aesthetic thought during the 20th century tended to define art in terms of functionality: if an object was functional, it was therefore by definition not art, but craft. Certain materials were seen as being suitable for sculpture, the durable and precious materials like stone, metal and wood, while others less expensive and less durable (and hence also less collectible) such as ceramic and fibres of all sorts were relegated to the realm of craft. With reference to this debate Susan Vogel considers the ways in which African art has been exhibited during the past century in the Western world and notes that the ways in which African art and artefacts were curated and exhibited reflect the ways in which these objects were regarded by the Western world. This view has almost always been at variance with the ways in which these objects were viewed in their country of origin.

As curators in the Western world came increasingly across the past century to read African cultural artefacts as art objects these objects began to be displayed in the prevailing mode of display as art objects. They moved from the ethnographic museum to the art gallery. During the 20th century the category which could loosely be regarded as “African Art” has expanded progressively and now includes all sorts of functional objects previously regarded as objects of ethnographic interest only (Vogel 1998).

Arthur Danto argues that “the boundary between art and the rest of reality is inflexible” (Danto 1988:18) and that “the line between art and reality, between art and artefact, is absolute” (Danto 1988:20). The problem for him thus becomes to identify what belongs in each category. For Danto the mere transference of what is artefact in African culture to Western culture where it loses its meaning does not turn it into a work of art despite the superficial similarity that it may have to certain works of art made in the West during the 20th century. The distinction between art and artefact then becomes a matter of the intent of the maker. But despite this argument there exists an increasingly large body of work from Africa which is displayed in art galleries and is designated “African Art”.

In terms of my own work I find this debate now largely an irrelevant academic issue. When I began working on this project I was concerned that what I was doing was pot making, not art making. As I complete this project I find that this is an issue which no longer presents as a source of concern. The works that I have made for this exhibition are all hand-crafted, and many of them could be, in another context, utilitarian objects. The sense of there being a function (albeit a metaphorical one) for these objects is important to me.
In 1937 the Romanian sculptor Brancusi created a memorial in the municipal park at Tirgu-Jui. *The table of silence, The gate of the kiss and The endless column* were erected in commemoration of those who had died in a defence of the city which had occurred in 1916. It is *The table of silence* which interests me particularly (Shanes 1989:85-91). A low round table made of travertine marble is surrounded by twelve chairs also of marble. Tables speak of food and of eating: the shape used for this table echoes the round shape of communion tables found in certain Greek orthodox churches which Brancusi would have been familiar with as a child. The fact that this table needs to be read as an object with significance beyond the purely functional can be seen in that the distance between the chairs and the table is too great for one to sit at the table and eat. This is not just a picnic table in a park. In his work Brancusi often employed the use of a complex base upon which to display his works of sculpture: the chairs here echo those base structures, but they are empty. Their very emptiness evokes a feeling of absence, in this case for those who died in 1916. The empty chairs speak forcibly of the presence of the dead. I have tried to do the same thing with my chairs.
SECTION TWO: PRESENTATION OF THE EXHIBITION

This MFA comprises nine large ceramic vessels. I have also made nine ceramic chairs, one to complement each of the vessels. The chairs are made to scale for the pots, as if the pots were the people to whom they refer. The chairs are empty and are intended to evoke the sense of the presence of the person for whom each was intended. Other small objects fill the pots, stand on the chairs, and stand on the floor in proximity to the pots. Most of these are made of clay, some are of natural materials like twigs and seeds, some are found objects transformed by being dipped in casting slip and fired.

The primary material is clay. I have used a wide variety of clays, stoneware, earthenware, porcelain, brick clay, as well as raw clay which I excavated and prepared for use myself. I have not painted or glazed any of the surfaces, but some have been treated with oxides, or polished with fat, or burnished with graphite. All of these finishes use natural materials and have been used by potters for centuries. I have exploited the surface textures and colours of naturally occurring clays.

Many of the objects have been created with holes around the rims or at strategic points on the surfaces. Some of these holes are practical, in order that other objects may be bound onto the primary object; others are to evoke the sense of there having once been an object, now lost, which was attached at that point. The nature of the "lost" object is not obvious; the holes thus convey a sense of loss in general. Although they are not funerary vessels, similar enigmatic holes can be seen at the base of some of the Lydenberg heads, the earliest known ceramic vessels in Southern Africa, dating from about 600 A.D. (Philips 1996:194 – 5).

Natural materials have been incorporated: wood, sand, thorns, fossil materials, white cloth, and leather thongs. The works have been made by hand, using coiling of clay as the chief building method. They display the slight asymmetry inherent in the handbuilt vessel.

The works have all been placed upon the floor so as to invite the viewer to walk around them, to look down on them, and to see the inside surfaces and the goods contained within. Anthony Gormley talked about his being concerned with the interior view, with the space within, and the positioning of my works seeks to invite contemplation of what is usually occluded. The urns are arranged in two rows in order that each urn and its accompanying chair may be seen in conjunction with the others in the exhibition, and specifically in relation to its neighbours. Chairs generally do stand upon the floor, but not so pots: in placing the vessels upon the floor I am deliberately making a connection with communities in societies other than the industrialised west. In these societies, pots commonly have significance more than the utilitarian and are frequently used in rituals at various stages of life, and in the rituals surrounding deaths.
THE INDIVIDUAL WORKS:

No-one so much as you

An urn which celebrates a love relationship, and reflects upon the geology of the earth.

The clays come from Cape Pottery supplies, Crammix, and from my own excavation. The urn was coiled, and then scraped to thin the walls, and then bisque fired.

I used a mixture of clays in order that the pot would speak of the variety of colours and textures of the earth, as one might see them where natural forces had cut away a section of the earth, or where a railway cutting or roadwork had exposed to view a section of the sediments of which the earth is formed. The pot is very wide, and the widest point occurs at the top, creating a precarious balance. The darkest clays are at the top of the pot, and the curved rim forms a shelf. This feature is intended to give a sense of strong presence, yet vulnerability because of the tonal lightness of the clays beneath it. Because of its size a sense of space is created within the pot, the roundness of the vessel is emphasised, and the internal colouring is gentle, like the soft underbelly of a wild animal.

There are holes at intervals around the rim. These holes create a sense of there having been attachments to this vessel which have been lost. From some of the holes hang cloth specimen bags which are labelled. Inside these bags are earth items: very fine wind-blown red dune sand which comes from the Kalahari, of the same beautiful colour as some of the other terracotta pots on this exhibition, the white bleached bones from the spinal column of a large fish found on a beach in the Eastern Cape, fossil-bearing nodules from the Tankwa area of the Karoo, and pebbles from the ancient Dwyka Tillite rock formation which were smoothed and faceted by the passage of glaciers 300 million years ago. All of these items speak of a love for and inquiry into the nature of the earth itself and the varieties of life upon it. They speak also of the age and constant change of the natural world and invite one to ponder the comparative brevity of the history of humankind.

Accompanying this pot is a clay “stone” (height:22cm, width: 34cm) which was made using a variety of white clays, some of very rough texture, in order to make a clay object which bore resemblance to a stone. The clay was loosely coiled around a ball of newspaper which burnt out during the firing. The hole in the base is to allow for the expansion of the air contained within the object during the firing process. Lettered onto this stone are the words:

No one so much as you
Loves this my clay
Or would lament as you
Its dying day
(Lewis, C. Day 1956:52).
The verse comes from a longer poem by Edward Thomas.

The poet makes the same identification of the body with clay which I have attempted to make, both in my written dissertation and in the works themselves. I find the reversal in the text interesting: the poet here anticipates his own death being mourned by his beloved (and in my appropriation of the poem, I, as the creator of the urn, contemplate my own death as viewed by the person for whom the urn is intended). The very simple rhyme scheme (a b a c) and the equally simple diction contribute to the moving quality of this brief verse. I have taken the title for the urn from this verse of poetry.
The chair (height: 27cm, width: 36 cm) derives from the form of a Yoruba stool carved in granite gneiss, made sometime between the 12th and the 15th centuries. It was exhibited in London in 1995/6 as part of the “Africa, the Art of a Continent” exhibition.

The chair which I have made also owes much to the traditional head-rest made by many peoples in Africa, notably the Zulu in KwaZulu Natal:

> What the majority of these headrests have in common is a covert or more often than not explicit allusion to the form of an animal, presumably a bull or a cow. Those with numerous pairs of legs were probably intended to invoke the idea of a large herd, which may also be true of the amasumpa pattern. This reference to cattle is entirely understandable given that cattle are a major source of wealth and that it is through them that people maintain communication with their ancestors. The use of cattle in bride wealth transactions may also be relevant in this regard. Historically, headrests formed a part of the dowries young Zulu-speaking brides took with them to their husbands’ homesteads. But today only ardent traditionalists still commission headrests for this purpose (Philips 1996: 209).

Similar headrests are made by the Shona in Zimbabwe:

While very few such headrests are still being used today among the Shona, and even fewer are made, the tradition can be traced back to ancient ruins in Zimbabwe, and possibly even to Great Zimbabwe itself. Headrests were personal items and appear to have been cherished by their owners. They were often carried on long journeys and were generally buried with their owners at death. Most of the older Shona headrests are carved in a hard wood and have acquired a deep dark brown patina and shiny surfaces from continual handling and use (Philips 1996: 204).

The chair was coiled, and the seat was added as a horizontal slab on top of the coiled legs. The clay was red brick clay from the Crammix brick factory which was burnished with a sureform grater prior to firing to give a smooth quality to the surface. The textured holes are created where large pieces of grog (fired clay which is ground down and added to the clay to strengthen and open up the clay) have fallen out in the process of burnishing. Once fired, the chair was rubbed with red ochre and then polished with petroleum jelly.
No-one so much as you: chair
His own vine and fig tree

An urn to memorialise the life and death of a farmer who lived in the Eastern Cape.

The clay is Rosso, a heavily grogged red earthenware clay from Cape Pottery Supplies. The urn was coiled, and then fired to 1120 degrees C. This higher than is usual temperature for a bisque firing causes the colour to deepen and gives this dark red colour.

The form of this urn comes from the Mediterranean form of the storage jar made in Crete two thousand years BC. Variants on this shape have been widely used throughout the Mediterranean world in the intervening centuries. In Thrapsano on Crete very large pithoi (storage vessels) following this form are still thrown in joined sections on the wheel. The original pithoi found in excavations on Crete could hold as much as 160 litres. Such vessels were used for storing oil, wine and cereals, and were sometimes also used as burial urns. The medallions on the sides of my urn echo those on the Cretan vessels (Blandino 1984:37).

Imprinted around the neck of this vessel are two sets of dates:
  three.six.forty-eight
  ten.ten.eighty-one
These dates encompass the life-span of the person whose urn this is.

The vessel has been filled with bundles of wild plants cut from the veld of the Eastern Cape, cut, dried and bundled. The scent as they filled the vessel when newly cut was wonderful, but this has almost vanished as they dried although a very attenuated scent can still be generated by crushing the leaves. The larger branches come from the Aloe ferox which is prolific in the Eastern Cape. The dried stems have a scaly texture, not unlike that of the scaly skin of snakes and lizards. The smaller shrubs were cut from a variety of what is loosely termed Karoo bush, much valued by farmers as pasture for sheep. The bundled herbs also remind one of bunches of medicinal herbs and as such speak of healing. Within the Christian tradition there is a view that holds that death (with the hope of the resurrection of the body) is the ultimate healer.
His own vine and fig-tree
The chair (height: 36cm, width: 43cm) derives also from Mediterranean ceramics. I discovered this shape in looking at pictures of miniature terracotta furniture made by the Mycaenans. Similar chairs have been found also at Delphi, Cyprus, Tiryns, and other Mediterranean locations (Richter 1989). Miniature terracotta furniture seems to have been made for inclusion in burials (Higgins 1986). I used the wide open half-bowl shape upon three legs which can be seen in these tiny thrones. The legs were coiled, the seat made from a slab, and the curved back was coiled upon this base. The leaves which decorate the back of the seat are from the Eastern Cape tree, Cussonia spicata (the cabbage tree, or kiepersol).

I chose these leaves because the tree is very typical of the Eastern Cape vegetation, and also because the leaves themselves are so decorative, symmetrically growing off a middle stem, yet with an interesting variety of leaflets upon each stem.

The lettering on the back of the chair comes from the prophecy of the Old Testament prophet Micah:

and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nations
neither shall they learn war anymore:
but they shall sit every man under his vine and fig tree (Micah 4:3,4).

I have adapted this text because it seems to me to epitomise the ideal of the farmer—a person who has, to all intents and purposes, his own self sufficient kingdom where he can live and work in peace. Secure and prosperous, the dream of every farmer.

Both the chair and the urn in this set have text imprinted into them. The letters were imprinted using alphabets obtained from sets of letters which were used in the hand setting of type before the use of computer type setting became prevalent. The most ancient system of writing in the world, cuneiform writing from the ancient Middle East, was also impressed into clay tablets using a blunt stylus as a tool. The function of writing is to preserve language and information through time and across space.

To write is thus to create a system of storage. This urn is also a storage space: it is a repository of memory and information about the life of the farmer to whom it is dedicated.
His own vine and fig-tree: chair
White wands

An urn for youthful strength and aspiration.

Rosso clay has been used here too. The urn was painted with a charcoal slip before firing. It was bisque fired to 1020 degrees C. Because of its height this urn could not fit into the kiln in one piece. I therefore cut it in half before firing. The red earthenware clay of which it was made can be seen at the join. The white wands for which the urn is named rise up from the rim. They are peeled sticks, some oleander, and some quince. These two trees were chosen because the quality of the wand, once peeled, most closely approximated to the idea I had in mind. I tried a number of other trees before choosing these.

In making this urn, I wanted to created a form which was strong and masculine, but also showed a certain delicacy and tentativeness. The height of the white peeled wands which reach up, and the spaces between them, set up a feeling of tension which is balanced by the strong definiteness of the shape of the urn. The variable gray surface which, depending on the light, can almost cause the form to disappear, again contradicts the strength of the form. The wands can be read as a barrier, but also, in their reaching upwards, as the notion of ambition and aspiration made visible.

The chair (height: 40cm, width: 34cm)

This chair has an African antecedent, the high-backed chief's stool, from Tanzania, carved from wood in the late 19th century. As with nearly all wood carving from Africa, this piece is monoxylous. I have adapted the way the base fits onto the legs and back of the chair from this source. The wooden chair has a higher back, very difficult to achieve in clay where a large slab of clay (although coiled) creates a very heavy weight which is in tension with the base. The wood carver who works form one piece of wood would not have had this problem - wood also has a much greater tensile strength than ceramic does. This chair was also painted with gray slip before being fired, having been coiled in Rosso clay.
White wands
Through a glass darkly

An urn for Christian spirituality, an urn which celebrates the life and commemorates the death of a man who prayed thus:

Holy God, make me holy,
Holy God, make me whole.

A variety of clays have been combined in this urn. White stoneware, red earthenware, and a mixture of my own impure clay wedged with white stoneware to give a greater degree of plasticity. Broken pieces of bone and cork were wedged into some of the clay – these fragments of organic material burned out in the kiln creating the irregular holes towards the top of the vessel. This urn began as a coiled pot, but the top half was created by adding flat wedges of slab. This accounts for the asymmetrical rim. The outside of the pot was scraped smoothly, but in the inside the joins were left evident. The pot was bisque fired to a comparatively low temperature. After firing it was treated on the outside with black iron oxide.

My intention was to create a wide open pot which was large, encompassing, but very fragile. The inclusion of foreign organic material which would not survive the firing process was in order to emphasize this fragility. The broken rim, too, contributes to this sense. The figure inside the pot is that of an angel. There are very many proto-types for angels within the history of art, but I did not want to identify with any one of these. This is why the angel is so simplified, it is a simple organic form, rounded and smoothed like weathered rocks. The angel figure is made of red earthenware clay, and its wings are white porcelain. That the angel is seated within a most fragile pot is also deliberate. It is intended to convey the notion that the spirit can reside within the most fragile of human forms. The apostle Paul in the 1st century said, speaking of human knowledge of God, that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (St Paul’s 2nd letter to the Corinthians, 4:7). The angel within the pot is intended to convey exactly that.

There is text on the wings of the angel. The text has two sources, the Kyrie from the mass:

Lord, have mercy,
Christ, have mercy.

and from part of the text of St Paul’s 1st letter to the Corinthians,

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face:
now I know in part; but then I shall know as I am known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The title for this urn is taken from this quotation.

These porcelain wings are exceedingly fragile. The life of the spirit is paradoxically both very delicate and tender, and yet it is also the strength which informs the whole body. This angel-within-the-pot is intended to convey this paradox.

The angel sits within the pot on a bed of red sand, the red forming a beautiful foil for the whiteness of the wings.
Through a glass darkly
The chair (height: 52cm, width: 47cm)
This chair was also made from Rosso clay. The legs were coiled, a slab base was placed upon these, and the back was then coiled up in a curved shape. The surfaces were burnished prior to firing, and then rubbed with petroleum jelly after firing. The deep orange-red colour relates to the temperature at which it was fired.

The fishes on the chair are based on the use of this motif in Christian iconography. Jesus in one of his miracles fed five thousand with bread and fishes, many of the early disciples were fishermen, and Jesus after his resurrection made himself known to his disciples on the beach in a shared meal of fish. The fish that I have used on this chair are African fish, and the form of the fish derives from a carved wooden door from Baule, in the Ivory Coast. On this particular door the carved fish stand out in low relief, fins and tails spread as though flying (Philips 1996:452).
That my chaff might fly

This urn is the one which I have designated as my own; it is an urn for an artist who is also wife and mother.

The urn is coiled in Rosso clay. After firing it was polished with black graphite, a powdered metal with a very fine particulate structure. This accounts for the metallic sheen which this pot has.

The tea cups which are positioned upon the rim of the pot are in contrast to the strong positive shape of the urn itself. They are fragile, made of porcelain, and balance very precariously on the rounded shoulder of the pot. They are set there in an echo of the swag or garland which was often draped around the rim of a pot in the neo-classic tradition. But this garland is essentially flawed: the cups themselves are squashed or misshapen, and are of dubious useful value. Their balance on the rim is very precarious – as such they deal with the difficulties experienced by women in holding in balance the whole domestic edifice.

The title for this urn comes from Gerard Manley Hopkins sonnet “No I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee”. I quote the poem in full.

Not, I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not feast on thee;
Not untwist – slack they may be – these last strands of man
In me or, most weary, cry I can no more, I can;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not choose not to be.
But ah, but O thou terrible, why wouldst thou rude on me
Thy wring-world right foot rock? Lay a lionlimb against me?
scan
With darksome devouring eyes my bruised bones? And fan,
O in turns of tempest, me heaped there; me frantic to avoid thee and liee?

Why? That my chaff might fly; my grain lie, sheer and clear.
Nay in all that toil, that coil, since (seems) I kissed the rod,
Hand rather, my heart lol lapped strength, stole joy, would laugh, cheer.
Cheer whom though? The hero whose heaven-handling flung
me, foot trod
Me? Or me that fought him? O which one? Is it each one? That night, that year
Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!)
my God (Gardner 1953: 60).

It is difficult to comment on such an astonishing poem. That my chaff might fly, my grain lie, sheer and clear, remains my desire.
That my chaff might fly
A number of domestic objects accompany this urn. There are two white bowls, inside of which lie babies’ night-dresses, transmogrified in clay. They are held gently within the bowls, made permanent within the kiln, and yet intensely fragile, so much so that the merest touch would disintegrate the folds of what was once fabric, now clay. Transformation is a difficult exercise. The eggs are also made of clay, white stoneware. The symbolism is obvious. The bowl is that which contains and shelters, in a domestic context it is that which conveys nourishment, but in a spiritual sense it can also be the begging bowl of the monk, the acknowledgement of need and dependence. There are other cups around this urn, also small domestic objects which speak of life in families, of the small intimacies of every day. Some of the cups look ancient, as though they have been excavated from long-gone burials. As such they draw attention to the fact that domestic ceramics have been found as grave goods within very ancient burials. These small things in daily use are significant. The little intimacies of every day make up the fabric of our lives.

The cups were thrown on the wheel in porcelain, and then altered by hand. After bisque firing they were variously treated: some were smoke fired, some were treated with either red or black iron oxide, others were glaze fired with a black matt glaze which in some cases was almost completely wiped off prior to firing.

The chair (height: 44 cm, width: 30 cm)
The chair was made from red earthenware clay. It was coiled, then painted with red earthenware slip prior to firing to give a “softness” a seductive smoothness, to the surface. The chair was high fired to 1160 degrees in order to give a dark red colour.

This was a very difficult form to make: this chair is the third version. I had intended to make the make the back continuous with the seat, but this proved impossible. I therefore made the chair in two pieces, and joined the back to the seat after firing. The form derives from the padded chair, upholstered with buttons, which has been seen in various guises within western European furniture for some centuries. I wanted to make a feminine chair, one where the soft buttoned mounds of the upholstered seat could be read also as breasts. The surface is obviously hard, but I wanted to create an illusion of the softness of silky skin.

Upon the seat of the chair is a pair of scissors, again an obvious reference to the sphere of the domestic, to woman’s work. These scissors were wrapped in crepe bandage which had been dipped in clay slip and then fired in the kiln. The bandage obviously burned away, and the scissors were left looking as though they too could have been retrieved from some ancient burial. Cutting and binding will always be woman’s work.
That my chaff might fly: chair

That my chaff might fly: bowl
Daily bread

I have made six loaves of bread. "Six days you shall labour and do all your work," was the injunction of the Hebrew God of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 5:13). These loaves are to be read in conjunction with the previous urn.

Real bread (chosen because of its simple sculptural shape and textured surface) was used to make two plaster casts, both two-piece moulds. White stoneware casting slip was used to cast the loaves. Porcelain clay was used to make the objects on top of the loaves. I chose porcelain because of its whiteness, and because of its fineness.

The loaves function as pedestals for the small sculptural objects on top of them. The objects all relate to my life as a young wife and mother living on a farm in the Eastern Cape. The prickly pear grows freely there, and is used for fodder for stock in times of drought. The fruit is also eaten each year. Served chilled, it is cool and strange, mostly sweet. The thorns of the Acacia karoo which surround the prickly pear speak of stockades and fences, both a reality of farming life in South Africa.

The white-thorned tree is ubiquitous in the drier areas of the Eastern Cape. The small rabbit, bipedal in its waist-coat, refers to children's stories, especially those from England which English-speaking South African children grew up on, and which they, in turn, read to their children. The kitchen table and two chairs form a small monument to the pleasant intimacies of domestic life, as does the teapot, set upon its lace cloth in a desire that the daily rituals be correctly observed. The single grave stone, surrounded by a low white-washed wall, is to be seen on most South African farms.

The sixth loaf is surmounted by copper wire which reaches up, in the same way as the peeled sticks do on the White Wands urn. The wires form a fuzz, or an aura, or a palpable sense of spirituality.

The symbolism of bread is obvious: it is the staff of life. The title for this series Daily bread comes from the prayer which Jesus offered as a model for his disciples: "give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). No more than this, but it is enough, it is satisfactory. This is the word used in T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi" for their discovery of the place of the birth of Jesus:

Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory (Roberts 1965:104).

As with the bread, the adjective speaks of a deep sense of adequateness. "Satisfactory" as an adjective may appear to convey the sense that the bare minimum has been achieved, but anything more than satisfactory could be seen as being in excess. To be deemed "satisfactory" is thus to be found to be entirely adequate.
Daily bread
An urn for a young woman, version one.

This urn is made from white stoneware clay to which additional roughly ground grog was added, both for texture and for strength. It was bisque fired, and then treated with black iron oxide after firing in order to enhance the textural detail on the shoulder where gingko leaves have been engraved.

This urn is tall and slim and elegant. It rises from a small base to a delicately asymmetrical rim. On the shoulder is a pattern formed from engraved gingko leaves, very beautiful decorative leaves from a tree which is a living example of a very ancient species of tree. The use of the gingko leaf echoes the theme of the great age of the natural world which other urns in this exhibition touch on. One of the shoulders of the urn has been broken through, as though the clay became so stretched and fragile that it just was not there any more. This hole speaks of fragility, but it also speaks of access: through it one can see in to the urn, and inside one can see a heart made of porcelain which hangs from the holes in the rim opposite this hole. A furze of copper wire surrounds this hole, creating a feeling of energy, and also to some extent veiling the hole. Access is offered, and simultaneously denied.

The chair (height: 48cm, plus 29cm, width: 24cm)

The chair is also bisque-fired white stoneware clay. The shape is feminine, reminding one of the softly upholstered chair in Western European tradition. The delicate twigs which project from the top of the fluted back come also from the Karoo. To me they seem to serve the same function as the furze of wire does in the urn. This chair was also very difficult to make; this is the third version.
Gingko leaves
An urn for a young woman, version two.

This pot is made of Rosso clay and the surface was burnished prior to firing. The urn was fired to 1120 degrees: a high-temperature bisque firing. This is the only urn which is asymmetrical in construction. As the dimensions indicate, it is almost as wide (at the widest part) as it is tall.

The urn rises from a relatively small base, and swings widely up and out, to return to a similarly small aperture at the top. Because the opening is small, the interior space is fairly dark. Because the pot is wide, the interior space is quite big. This darkness is intended to be sensuous and mysterious. White porcelain and off-white stoneware butterflies and moths lie in a heap at the bottom of the pot, looking like fallen leaves, like torn scraps of paper. Some have been glued onto the interior walls. Hanging above the butterflies from the hoies in the rim are white clay aeroplanes. Flight is used as a metaphor for dreams, and for the longings of the spirit.

The chair (height: 50cm, width: 31 cm)

This chair is modelled on the carved limestone seats upon which people, sometimes musicians, sit in Cycladic carvings. The legs and the back were coiled, and the seat is obviously a slab. The same butterflies which occupy the bottom of the urn are found on the seat of this chair also. The chair is made from red earthenware clay, and was fired to 1020 degrees.

Accompanying this urn and its chair is a white stoneware egg upon which butterflies and moths have been engraved, the motif repeating the theme established in the embellishment of the urn.
Earth pot

An urn to celebrate the beauty and age of the earth, the place where we have our being.

This pot was made, as are some others in this body of work, from a variety of clays used in conjunction with one another. The base of the pot was moulded into a clay bowl, from this it was coiled, and then the final sections were thrown as very thin slab and added to the coiled base. I made the pot as large and as thin as I was able to in order to enhance the notion of fragility. The fracturing of the earth’s surface across geological time gives the lie to the idea of stability inherent in phrases like “as old as the hills”. Not only is human life transient and unstable, the very earth we find ourselves upon is endlessly in a process of change and movement.

The use of a variety of clays makes the pot relatively more unstable than a homogeneous vessel would be. I tried here too to make a pot which would echo the variety of the landscape, where the rim would look like a rim of mountains etched against the sky.

The outside of the pot was treated with red iron oxide after firing, in order to enhance the redness of the clays, and to minimise the tonal difference between the white clays and the red clays. The inside of the pot was treated with black iron oxide, especially at the bottom of the pot, so as to create a mysterious darkness at the bottom.

Inside the pot I have placed two small brown clay hands, fists clenched in a compact shape, and some white stoneware eggs. This urn is a pot about the earth, and the way that people have lived upon it for the past two million-odd years. Above these objects is a small dried shrub from the Karoo – its almost perfectly circular shape invited the use to which I have put it. As such it partly obscures the objects placed below it, lending to them an air of age and mystery.

The chair (height: 37.5cm, width: 24.5cm)

This chair is a companion piece to the urn above – it is also designed to remind one of the variety of the colours and textures of the earth. It was coiled, and scraped down when leatherhard with a sureform grater, then bisque fired. On top of it stand three objects: a bowl, a cup and an egg, evidence of the life of people upon the earth.
I saw the Lord, high and lifted up

This urn was the first of the series to be made. It was coiled from red earthenware clay, and some of the clay which I excavated myself was added for variety of colour and texture. The urn was bisque fired, the surface having been burnished at leatherhard stage. After firing it was rubbed with fat, and then with petroleum jelly in order to seal the surface and enhance the colour.

The urn has a rim on the inside which was designed for a lid, but the form seemed stronger without the lid. The lettering on the outside of the urn, and the title which I have given to it, comes from the vision of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah in the temple. I quote from Isaiah Chapter 6, 1 - 3:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon the throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is full of his glory.”

The lettering on the outside of the urn gives this vision as recorded in the King James 16th century version of the Bible. The archaism is deliberate: I find the poetic quality of the archaic English beautiful, and I wish, by using this older language, to draw attention to the age of this vision, and to the long years during which humankind have been in pursuit of the gods, dreaming dreams and seeing visions.

The chair

This chair is also made in Rosso clay. It is a very strong and forgiving clay, properties significant when coiling large forms. It was bisque fired and then rubbed with petroleum jelly after firing.

The shape is reminiscent of African chairs carved out of the cylindrical trunk of a tree. The decorative wings on the outside of the chair echo the theme of the seraphim in the urn with which it belongs. The actual carving of the feathers on the wing owe a debt to Assyrian carving of winged beasts which can be seen in the British Museum (Reade 1983).
I saw the Lord, high and lifted up: chair
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