



Violence and *beauty*



The work of largely self-taught South African artist Lucinda Mudge is fast gaining notice in both her homeland and abroad. Fascinated by the darker side of society, she creates challenging ceramic art laced with a touch of mischief, explains *Sue Herdman*

If you like your ceramics with a sense of anarchy and socio-political comment, balanced by a rigorous beauty, then Lucinda Mudge's work is for you. Her website announces her art as 'unruly'. Her vases are powerful, subversive and mischievous. The collections bear names, often gleaned from crime stories, that are not for the faint-hearted. *Kill You Eat You* is one; *Take What You Want* is another. Her vessels can depict barbed wire, arrows, knives and menacing, long-tailed beasts. They might allude to infectious diseases. Conversely, they can hold images of beguiling mermaids or exquisite flora and fauna. Every one is rich in colour, with the glossiest of glazes. Each carries a message that, at the time of creating, the artist felt compelled to make, influenced by happenings in her immediate world.

WILD AT HEART

Born and raised in South Africa, between the forests of Knysna and the Tsitsikamma Mountains, Lucinda says her childhood was a wild one. Her parents ran a furniture design and making business and, when not at school, she and her brother roamed the bush surrounding their tiny, pink, corrugated iron home. Today she lives on the beach at Keurboomstrand near Plettenberg Bay, in a house she and her husband Sam designed, surrounded by indigenous sand dune thickets. 'This area,' she says, 'is known as "The Garden of Eden" due to its natural beauty. We have "wild pets" including a hand-reared white-throated swallow that has returned to us this year from Uganda, and frogs that make the same journey across our decks each night'. Yet this paradise comes, like the local scorpions, with a sting in its tail. 'You'll be aware,' Lucinda says, 'of the tensions in this country: the incidents of violent crime, rapes, murders and beatings at home. At the back of my mind there is always the idea that something bad could happen.'

MAIN IMAGE: *Untitled* **DETAILS, FROM TOP:** *Is It Too Late*
Now To Say Sorry – Sorry For You; Baby I Live For Danger; OH, OH

This sense of the 'fearful possible' feeds into works such as *Doors. Locked*, one of 26 pieces Lucinda created for an exhibition called *The White Tiger and Other Stories*. The shimmering vase shows a gold lily on one side, and on the other the nightly security checks she runs through, with the words inscribed into the clay: *Doors. Locked / Walkie Talkie. On / Beams. On / Phone. Near Bed / OK. Good Night / ?*

'My work is a reflection of who I am, what I see and how the people around me behave,' she says. 'Those themes of beauty and violence will be recognisable to anyone who has been to South Africa. We have one of the biggest gaps between rich and poor in the world. We have a heavy history of repression. By word of mouth, reading stories online and hearing about them on the radio, I am constantly reminded of violence. I don't see any solutions. My *Kill You Eat You* work was the result of hearing of an Afrikaans boy band who were attacked when filming a video. The phrase was used by the attackers. I absorb such stories, which then resurface in my consciousness. My artistic practice revolves around this.'

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Lucinda's skill in translating her world into vessels is garnering attention, not just in her homeland, but overseas too. In 2016 curator Brian Kennedy chose three of her pieces for his exhibition *VASE: Function Reviewed* in Ireland. Her work also featured in the *Making Africa* exhibition staged at the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao in 2015. As part of that ongoing show her vases will be exhibited in America this year. Her first UK solo exhibition was at Everard Read in London in early 2017. For Lucinda, this exposure in Britain's capital was gently poetic, as it was in London that she took her early steps in pottery at an evening class, her first interaction with clay since school. At the time she was working as a photographer for Ralph Lauren. Prior to this she had graduated with a degree from the Michaelis School of Fine Art in Cape Town. It was at the Brixton pottery classes that

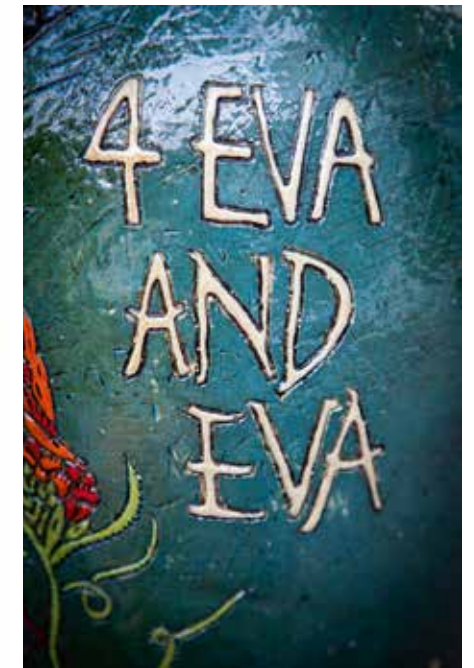
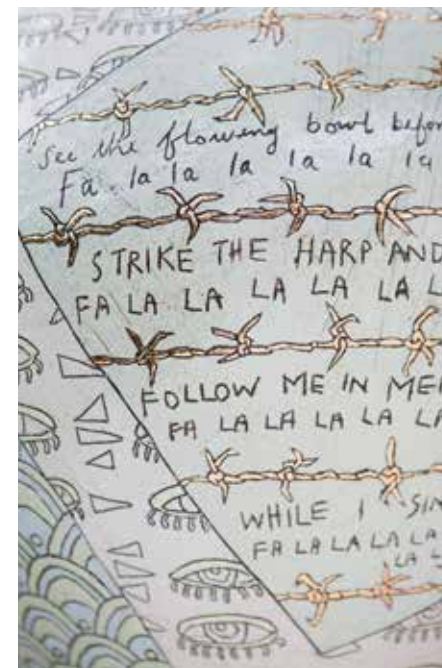
Lucinda first began to experiment with drawing on greenware tiles and using coloured slips but, she says, she learnt little else. 'Most beginners,' she muses, 'don't realise the extent to which success in such a class is carried by the studio. I never fired a kiln or had to buy my own glaze.' In 2010 she and Sam, having had their first child, decided to return to South Africa. There she took the plunge, 'bought a kiln and some clay', and started to explore ceramics further.

INTO THE UNKNOWN

In 2013 Lucinda was thrown a challenge. Trent Read, Director of Everard Read in Franschhoek and Knysna Fine Art approached her to create a body of work – of vases. The idea appealed. She liked the context of the vase: its history and familiarity of shape, on to the surface of which she could create surprises. There was one problem – she had never made one. Returning from her meeting with Trent she typed: 'How to make a really big coil pot' into YouTube. A film of a family studio in Korea came up. 'I joined Facebook groups too and was – and continue to be – cheered by the international sharing of information,' she says. It was an unorthodox start, but fruitful. 'The internet,' Lucinda admits, 'has allowed me to learn everything I know.'

When asked how she has honed her approach, the answer comes: 'my technique is – whatever works. I've had trained ceramists come to visit my studio and they've been appalled by my working methods,' she admits. In reality, Lucinda skilfully coils her vases, many of which are 60cm high, with the largest being 85cm. Each vase takes up to three months to complete. She uses clay from a local pottery, with a good quantity of coarse grog added to it. When coiling, she watches to see when the base looks as if it can no longer take any more weight, then wraps it in clingfilm, takes it out to the sun and, when sufficiently dry, adds the next layer. 'Once I have completed the rim,' she explains, 'I put the whole vase in a plastic bag, which allows the wetter clay at the top to be reabsorbed by the dryer below.' She rails against the time it takes to make, saying: 'I'm impatient; I fight with this medium all the time.' A salve comes when working with colour, which for her is the 'most important' technical element: 'I use slips and mix in the stains.' She works with a three-stage firing process; bisque at 980°C, glaze at 1180°C and gold at 700°C. When the piece is bisque-fired she rubs in the black oxide/stain and then scrubs it off, leaving it in the crevices. She then glazes and follows this by painting on the gold lustre for the final firing.

Being largely self-taught, Lucinda's successes have been hard won. Among her challenges (notwithstanding an encounter with a large male baboon on the stairs of her home), have been those thrown up by the climate. The



LEFT: *Holy Shit*, detail **OPPOSITE FROM TOP LEFT CLOCKWISE:** *Fa La La La La*, detail; *In Court of Cats Rats Never Win*; *For Eva and Eva Amen*, detail; *If You're Feeling Guilty It's Because You Probably Are*; *Oh For Fuck's Sake*, detail; *Wake Me Up When It's All Over*; *Everything is Amazing*, detail; *Infectious Diseases* **CENTRE:** *All That I Am I Give To You*, detail

Images: courtesy the artist



LEFT: *My World's On Fire How About Yours*

BELOW RIGHT: *Untitled*; Lucinda at work in her studio

coastal mist in the Plettenberg area causes severe electrical problems; she has been through seven kilns. She currently has two, 'which have different personalities. When the larger one arrived I plugged in the kiln controller and naively sent a pot off to hell. I have never timed a firing. It seemed to be taking longer than usual, so I had a glass of wine and went to bed. When I woke it was still blazing like a small sun. It had collapsed against the interior wall of the kiln. My lesson? Fire that kiln lower than the other.'

CANVAS OF CLAY

For now, she says, the vase is the perfect 'canvas' to work with. 'It is in the round, so the stories I tell on the surface link up and there is a sense of repetition. I use this as a reference to the human condition – the idea that we are on repeat. With a vase, you can't see the whole picture at once. The image on the back is hidden, but we know it is there. It's an analogy with the way we live – of what we choose not to see, though we know it exists.' If you don't like the message on one side (and be warned, with phrases such as 'Oh For Fuck's Sake', this is art to consider twice before gifting to your favourite aunt), you can, as the artist says, simply turn that side away.

Some might observe parallels in Lucinda's work with that of Grayson Perry – the observations of society, heady

colour of narrative and a taste for satire. 'I made a conscious decision not to look at Perry's work when I began – nor that of Hylton Nel, a South African artist potter – as I didn't want to be influenced by them,' she responds. 'For me, Perry's work is defined by his observations of the British, while mine are formed by life here in South Africa: sun versus rain.'

What is clear is that Lucinda's work – brave, beautiful, wicked, arresting – reached new heights with the collection of 22 vases she created for her solo show in London last year. Choosing the title *The Wolf is Always Near*, she alludes to predation – drawing on that fear of violence in her native country. Additionally, and with her usual wry humour, the title is also a nod to her career as a contemporary artist: the fear of failure that nips at the heels of many in this world and the pressure to create artworks that are 'worthy'. 'I use humour, irony and mockery as a way of asking authentic questions,' she says, 'some of which can make the viewer uneasy, leaving it unclear whether the questions are serious or not. This ambivalence is intentional.'

Find out more about Lucinda's work at lucindamudge.wordpress.com

CAREER STEPS

- 1979: born in Knysna, South Africa
- 2000: graduated from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town
- 2010: returned to South Africa following four years as a photographer for Ralph Lauren in London; established her studio at Keurboomstrand
- 2013: began to make vases; in the same year had her first solo exhibition *The White Tiger and Other Stories* at Knysna Fine Art, South Africa
- 2014: solo exhibition *Lasers in the Jungle*, Franschoek, South Africa
- 2015: her work featured in *Making Africa* at the Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain and the Vitra Design Museum, Switzerland
 - 2016: two solo exhibitions, one in Kalk Bay and the other in Johannesburg; featured in *Making Africa*, Barcelona and in *VASE: Function Reviewed*, Ireland
 - 2017: solo exhibition at CIRCA, London; Lucinda's work now features in major collections internationally
 - 2018: solo show at Investec Cape Town art fair

