



Opposite and right Andile Dyalvane's collection of sculptural ceramic seating, entitled *iThongo* (meaning 'ancestral dreamscape' in isiXhosa), will be exhibited in New York City under the guardianship of Southern Guild. The offering is an homage to his ancestors, and an important commentary on the link between the past, the present and the future.



the malleability of feeling

When sculpted and fired, clay takes on a life of expressive transformation that instils ceramics with meaning. Tracy Lynn Chemaly was able to experience the surge of sentiment that the process invokes

It was amongst a congregation of stools, chairs and benches that I experienced the most vulnerable moment I can attribute to design. I was seated on a collectible work of art by ceramicist Andile Dyalvane. Other guests to Southern Guild Gallery that morning were settled on similar sculptural seats, gathered in a ceremonial circle. Assembled around a hearth of burning sage, we listened to Andile recount what had driven him to create *iThongo* (meaning 'ancestral dreamscape' in isiXhosa), this evocative exhibition of 18 seats, first revealed last year in the rural village of Ngobozana in the Eastern Cape, where he was born.

The series represents messages that come to the artist from his

ancestors: ideas, words and activities that are slowly being forgotten as modern ways replace traditional Xhosa practices. Through the visions and dreams he receives, Andile deftly crams sketchbooks with inspired drawings, transforming the most pertinent symbols and stories into unique ceramic pieces. Each translated shape holds a significant spiritual and cultural meaning, much greater than what the simple words used to title each object can convey.

I do not speak the language shared by Andile and his ancestors, nor have I ever walked on the land from which they hail. The names *uBuhlanti* (kraal) and *uMalusi* (shepherd), given to two of the stools, have never been concepts

to touch my soul. And yet, with my bare feet on the ground, hands grasping my terracotta stool, the things that Andile and his forefathers wish to keep alive stirred very viscerally inside of me.

There, in that circle of strangers, I cried. *iThongo* had transported me to my own ancestral dreamscape – a feeling of connection to a universal truth emitted through Andile's work.

Such is the power of ceramics, a medium of design that has been finding its rightful voice in the contemporary art world, with pieces by Andile and other local ceramicists – including his Imiso Ceramics partner Zizipho Poswa – being acquired by collectors and world-renowned museums.

Dependent on the fundamental elements of earth, water, air and fire for their creation, ceramic works are alchemic pieces fashioned by the tireless manipulation of the potter's hand. The fragility of clay in the fiery kiln, and its victorious emergence – robust and durable – adds value to its precious existence.

A highly tactile form of human expression, ceramic art combines traditional skills and techniques with innovation, utilitarianism and experimentation. Luckily, as I witnessed in that circle, seated on a stool titled *uMshayela* (broom), these processes do not need to be understood for one to appreciate the work. All that ceramics ask of us is that we feel them, whether it be with our hands or with our souls.