

# art & SOUL

TEXT AND PRODUCTION GILL CULLINAN PHOTOGRAPHS AND STYLING HENRIQUE WILDING





Astrid Dahl's white earthenware sculptures take their starting point from flowers. London, Paris and New York can't get enough of them.

"I first saw Astrid's work at Liberty in London," says Margie Robertson, owner of art gallery Africa Nova, "and I was blown away. I knew I had to track her down."

Astrid leads a relatively quiet life, working from her home studio in Nottingham Road in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. Her exquisite white earthenware sculptures have found an equally appreciative audience in Conran, with her work included in an exhibition of hers in Paris. In person she appears remarkably modest and almost surprised at the response to her pieces. "I never thought it would take off as it has," she says, "I wasn't aiming for it, but I persevered and three years down the line it's paid off."

After graduating in Fine Art at the former Durban Technikon (now the Durban Institute of Technology), Astrid moved to the Midlands to take up a job in a bronze casting foundry. It was designer and trend guru Neville Trickett who put her on the path she is on today; after having seen some of her student work, he asked her to make vases with broken edges. He then gave her a book on Karl Blossfeldt, who took magnified photographs of flowers in the 1800s.


Astrid could see the shapes of her work in Blossfeldt's pictures. "Neville challenged me and was an inspiration," says Astrid.

Astrid's current pieces are extremely challenging to execute. She begins by looking at pictures of flowers. "I have to logistically

work out how to do it," she says. "I turn a flower around and find a base." Her pieces are crafted using coils, and it was not for nothing that she was called the 'Queen of Coils' while at Tech. "People think that the segments are solid, but they're all coiled. I'm meant to do ceramics – it's something I know. I'm not scared of clay. I'll tackle it and go for it," she says.

"Nature inspires me to use my imagination," says Astrid. She'll start with a fuchsia, for example, but then it will evolve into something else. Delicate sprays of flowers are impossible given the technical limitations of the clay and the fact that Astrid needs to get her hands inside the vessels. Some of her pieces need internal structures to support the weight of arching petals, and in a new design she has opened the piece up to show the internal shapes.

Astrid's assistant Princess Goqa sands each piece for two days to achieve their beautiful continuity. After that a seal is applied to the porous earthenware clay and the colour is kept the same, which is just how Astrid wants it. "Somebody said I should do colour, but I disagree, they are what they are."

Anyone wanting one of Astrid's pieces has to order it at least two months in advance. "I love what I do," she says. "Everything of me is in there. With ceramics you have to be present during the whole process otherwise they may break. I'm not doing conceptual art. I want to make beautiful pieces that resonate with people." 

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