



LIVING ART

By Jennifer Hindle

Astrid Dahl challenges the boundary of clay. Using nature as her inspiration, she seeks out organic flower forms that are rendered static by high temperature firing. Interestingly,

though the earthenware is solid, it is certainly not lifeless and her pieces stand out like trophies immortalising glimpses of nature. However, they are not just trophies of nature. Possession of an "art piece" is as much a hallmark of the trendy, as it is a much coveted item by the well informed collector of South African art.

It seems so unlikely. Tacking your way through sheep pastures along the tree-lined driveway to the Dahl's homestead just off Nottingham Road seems in sharp contrast to the well-stocked and starkness of a New York Gallery floor. Jostling her way through a large collection of SPCA adopted pets, Astrid finally opens the gate to welcome me into her home and I wonder if this lovely beautiful serene pony-tailed strawberry blonde is aware of the fuss she is making beyond the borders of Nottingham Road and across the seas for that matter.

Astrid is humble. "I certainly think God has had a hand on my life. I often wonder if this is it, or am I being prepared for something else. Things could have gone really wrong in my life, I could have made all the wrong choices – I am a bit of a rebel you know, I didn't know I was going to marry Colin until he asked me to. Although we did not consciously sit down and plan when to have children, I am now 6 months pregnant and the timing seems perfect."

Her outlook on life may be the very reason Astrid has embraced the opportunities that have presented themselves and made a real

life. She started off life in Ladysmith and talks fondly of her childhood on a farm with no electricity and an outside toilet. The third of three daughters with only 4 years age difference between her and her eldest sister, the girls were brought up by their dad from a very young age. Her dad remarried and for a time, they were a family of five with three step siblings. From Standard 5, Astrid attended Wykeham Collegiate in Pietermaritzburg and quickly

settled as a boarder with her two older sisters paving the way. "All of us were good at maths and science and enjoyed the curriculum choices the school had to offer, and I could study art for matric." She went on to study fine art at Natal Technikon, majoring in ceramics in her final year.

After graduating, Astrid jumped at the opportunity to return to the countryside and worked in Dave Falconer's Birdman Foundry in Nottingham Road for a couple of years. Although she completed a few of her own bronzes, the medium was too restrictive and unworkable in its finished state. Her opportunity to work in ceramics again came around when Neville Trickett (Creator of Saint Verde and known for his discerning eye) commissioned pieces similar to those she had produced in her final year of Tech. Neville then gave Astrid a book that was to shape her future, a collection of photographs by Karl Blossfeldt (1928). A teacher and botanist, Karl Blossfeldt's photographs were made with a homemade camera to magnify flowers, buds and seed pods up to 30x the original size and as a result record features otherwise overlooked by the naked eye. In essence, Astrid has become one of his posthumous students and tirelessly explores his premise that all forms in the modern world are built upon basic structures that can be found in nature. Astrid began to explore the extent to which the geometry of plant life can be used in clay sculpture. This journey would bravely challenge the attributes of clay, notwithstanding any limitations. "Every natural form has a clay solution – I just have to work it out". Each sculpture is the result of sensitive observation of how a certain plant exists in nature, thereby informing the way in which she goes about producing a form in clay. "Although I may begin a piece with some intention, the clay has a will of its own and these "mistakes" often are beautiful and make the sculpture." The results speak for themselves and each piece in its unglazed white form resonates with a beauty that paradoxically celebrates the natural form from where it originates whilst at the same time defying its fragility and fleetingness in its solid unyielding form as fired clay.

I can't help but marvel at this girl, who despite her success has her feet firmly planted on the ground. Like her pots, she is unglazed and natural, her pregnant tummy proudly showing beneath her woollen jersey on this cold day and she looks so happy. "I don't know how



Astrid Dahl and her striking pieces, inspired by nature.

long this success will last. I take each day as it comes." Like the beautiful flower shapes all around, almost as if denying their ability to exist in clay, is an artist who loves what she does because it gives her life, not because it brings her success.

... And it is this paradox that seems to sum Astrid up for me – an Artist who finds it hard to believe she has made it, that she exists as an artist, yet, just like elements of the aloe metamorphosed in grains of sand standing on the table, she exists, in all her mesmerising beauty. Astrid Dahl: 084 799 8998