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# *Astrid Dahl Ceramics*

Astrid Dahl's gloriously bold, yet somehow delicate organic ceramics are found globally in public and private collections

Words by **Anne Schaffer**

Photographs supplied

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**A**strid Dahl was born in Empangeni in Kwazulu-Natal, describing herself as more of a farm girl, having spent a great deal of her time with her grandparents on a farm in Mtubatuba: “My childhood was fun, with adventure found in simple activities - no TV or electronic devices, so there was much innocent mischief. Later, Durban was my city experience, studying fine art and getting caught up in the late 90s’ Durban scene of exhibitions, alternate nightclubs, and loads of live music.”

Astrid studied Fine Art at the then Durban Tech, majoring in ceramics under the hugely influential Hendrik Stroebel. That’s where her love of clay and creating forms began. She recalls, “Hennie has always been a great inspiration to his students. His love of form and design continues to inspire me to this day. He encouraged us to explore and create, using clay as a visual language. I recall one particular occasion when a group of Zulu women came in to teach us the traditional method of coiling clay - that was when I found my true vocabulary.”

She graduated in 1999 with a degree in Fine Art, and together with two friends, moved to Nottingham Road in the KZN Midlands, to take up work in a bronze casting foundry. There she crossed paths with the well-respected designer Neville Trickett, who introduced her to the botanical photography of Karl Blossfeldt (1865 -1932). This was a pivotal encounter

which sparked an evolution in her journey with clay. Taking her cue from Blossfeldt’s monochromatic prints, she decided to work with white and black clay, as she saw it as creating a pure canvas for light and dark to ‘shape’ the piece.

Today, Astrid still lives in Nottingham Road, but with husband Colin and two children, Siri and Tom: “I love country life. We have several dogs, cats, chickens, fish and homing pigeons...and my studio. Taking time to exercise and do yoga before starting my work sets the tone and pace for my day,” comments Astrid. “Listening to audiobooks keeps me focused when I’m in the studio. I love going into my space to work (with all the dogs), never tire of it.

Astrid’s appreciation of her natural environment - rolling green hills, big blue skies, gorgeous sunrises and all that comes with country life, reveals itself in the beautiful forms she creates.

#### **Michelangelo asked Astrid about her work and art journey.**

I have always drawn and painted. I never thought consciously about art being part of my life journey and here it is, my career! I found my language in coiling pots. The bigger the vessel, the better to lose myself in that vast, echoing vessel, literally.





Clay has a life and a will of its own. Each sculpture transforms throughout the making process. These natural, organic forms inspire the sculptures, but the development of each is multi-faceted. I allow the clay space to grow and interact with me as I shape it, creating pieces that either closely resemble their origins or ones that are more abstract.

At the outset, I choose to use white or black clay depending on how the shape I have in mind will interact with the light. The white is far more reflective, and simplistic forms do well in it. The black clay - absorbing more light - needs to be more intricate in its form to allow the light to bounce through it and give it movement and life. Watching the light and its shadows shift and play across the smooth surface of each sculpture as the day passes into night, creates a sense of fluidity and motion, having a calming and centring effect on the viewer. The finish is cool and silky to the touch having been carefully consolidated and then sealed with museum-grade Renaissance wax.

My sculptures vary in complexity depending on the form I'm looking to capture. From highly complex pieces through to pieces which capture a motion or a concept. From symmetrical to bilateral symmetrical, each comes to life as I engage with the clay. Although the sculptures are heavy, my intention is to create pieces that have a feeling of lightness and fragility





Sarah Breedlove (December 23, 1867 – May 25, 1919), known as Madam C. J. Walker, was an American entrepreneur and philanthropist, regarded as **the first female self-made millionaire**.



and range from (30cm<sup>2</sup>) smaller works up to (80cm<sup>2</sup>) and sometimes larger.

My most challenging piece is a 42-piece installation going up a stairwell. It was about a six-month project that almost broke me with the continuous labour and intensity of trying to complete such a mammoth task. I had the 'curve' of the staircase made 1:1 and built the pieces on the frame so as to keep the curve of the larger pieces and have a visual of all the pieces together.

#### **What inspires you?**

You're working with a medium that organically unfolds to reveal a seemingly limitless potential of form.

Each sculpture begins with a reflection of the form I'm looking to create, taking into consideration any guidelines the client may have in mind or inspiration from nature. A decision on the final size happens when I create the base from which to coil. From there, coiling and shaping of the piece begins and grows, the layer of coil upon layer.

I see the process of coiling from the base up, as an exciting challenge, where I have to work with (or against) balance, tension, and gravity — all of which magnify the incredible beauty and potential of the form. There is a meditation to it. Once formed, the sculpture dries, and that timing is

dependent on the weather...nature dictates the schedule before it can be placed in the kiln for firing. Each sculpture is fired to earthenware temperatures of 1095 degrees - and twice over for the black pieces, to ensure easier sanding.

Sanding then smooths out the fired clay and allows me to refine the form even further to better catch the light or be more pleasing to the eye. It is then waxed and sealed to ensure its longevity and protect it from dust and other particles in its new home.

Carefully wrapped in bubble wrap, cushioned by paper and sealed into its own, specially made wooden crate, the sculpture is then ready to be couriered around the world safely.

#### **What's the dream?**

My dream is to do more and to do better. More water features, more bronzes, bigger designs in outdoor spaces, to have a gallery in every country representing my work. I want to travel and see the world with my family. I long to experience more of life and swim in all the oceans of the world. ❄️

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